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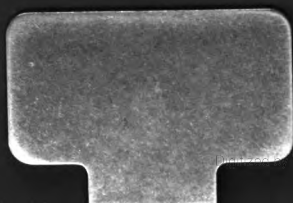
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IN SEARCH OF TRUTH.

CONVERSATIONS ON THE BIBLE AND POPULAR THEOLOGY, FOR YOUNG PEOPLE.

BY

A M Y.



"Now we see through a glass, darkly: but then face to face: now I know in part but then shall I know even as also I am known."—1 COR. xiii. 12.

"Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things."—PHIL. iv. 8.

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ALERE FLAMMAM.



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TO THE MEMORY OF ONE
WHO HAS LEFT THE RICH LEGACY OF HIS LOVE
TO BRIGHTEN AND ENRICH
MY LIFE,
THIS LITTLE VOLUME IS DEDICATED.

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P R E F A C E.

IN attempting a work like the present, I feel that I am placing myself in a difficult position. Thirty years ago, if any one dared to assert that a single statement in the Bible was not absolute truth, he would have been held to be unprincipled and irreligious. Although since then the popular feeling is somewhat modified, it is still considered very dangerous ground; and even where people themselves believe many parts of it to be of doubtful value, they hesitate to tell their children so, lest they become sceptical of all religious teaching. This result is, of course, one against which we must seriously guard; but do we gain our object by shutting our eyes to the difficulty? Truth will out; it will not be stifled; and therefore the best thing we can do is, surely, to meet the question boldly and examine its

merits. We must make up our minds to relinquish some of our old ideas if truth demands it ; and it is because we all find so much difficulty in forsaking the teachings of youth, that I have been emboldened to write this little book.

It is intended, as may be seen at the first glance, for young people who have arrived at an age when they can think, and take an interest in religious topics. If we can only guide them to a truer knowledge of the Bible's value, instead of straining and forcing upon it an unnatural one, we shall, I think, be doing them good service. At present the tendency is to accept all or none ; and many, finding much that jars against their better nature, are led to reject it all.

This is the aim, then, that I have had in view, to bring forth, as well as I am able, the true merits of this most valuable book—most valuable, because it brings us face to face, as it were, with the great men of olden times, and teaches us by their example what virtues to emulate and what vices to avoid. Besides, we often meet in its pages with words kindled by the Divine Spirit of wisdom and truth ; and then our hearts recognize its teaching, and we thank our God for the proofs of His ever nearness to the spirit of man that are shown in the lives of all great and good souls.

It will be seen that this work is of a very fragmentary nature : I have purposely made it so ; for I was anxious

to draw out thought, and not to fill the minds of my readers with simple assertions. It is also short, which in itself would be an argument in its favour with many; and being so, I trust that those who take it up will have patience to read to the end, and suspend their judgment until then.

The idea that I have wished to make prominent is, that the essence of Religion is love to God and man, to be shown in our actions of daily life; and if, in so doing, I have seemed to treat with disrespect any parts of the Bible or Popular Theology, it has been done simply because such parts seemed to me to degrade our purest ideal of God, and to impute motives and actions to Him that we should never do to any one whom we believed to be good and great. I have tried to make my readers understand that Truth, Justice, and Love must be of the same nature in God as in man, differing only in degree—and that what is wrong for man to do, would be impossible in the wise and loving Maker of all.

To any orthodox friends into whose hands this book may fall, I would just say a few words. I fully understand how shocking some of the statements must appear at first sight; and I have neither the presumption nor the desire to think that this book will convert any to my way of thinking; but what I do hope and trust is, that it may lead them to examine their position afresh, and perhaps modify slightly some of their opinions,—and,

in any case, that they will at least believe that we who differ are not actuated by a carping or sceptical spirit, but simply and solely by a desire to "search all things" that we may "hold fast to that which is true," and thus make our religion a constant guide, help, and comfort to us throughout the many trials and difficulties that we must experience through life.

"All-seeing God, 'tis Thine to know
The spring whence wrong opinions flow—
To judge, from principles within,
When frailty errs, and when we sin.
If wrong, forgive; approve, if right,
While faithful we pursue our light,
And, censuring none, are zealous still
To follow, as to learn Thy will."—*Rev. T. Scott.*

INTRODUCTION.

AROUND a cheerful fire, one cold December day, was gathered a group of young girls who were busily chatting over their various school experiences—two of them, twins of about sixteen, having just returned from abroad. Two elder ladies were seated near, listening with interest to their nieces' conversation.

"Well, and how did you really like Paris?" asked Mary, a tall, well-made girl of eighteen, who, though out of the school-room now, still retained a happy recollection of the time passed there.

"Like it? why famously," replied the twins, May and Cara, with one voice. "But most of all we loved the Sundays," added May.

"Why was that, dear," asked Aunt Pollie, rather astonished, for her remembrance of Sundays passed at boarding-school was any thing but a pleasant one.

"Why, auntie? Oh! because first of all, we were allowed to talk English on that day, and had also a room to ourselves, away from all the noise and racket of the rest. There was no fear of our turning Roman Catholic; for we were quite separated from the French girls on Sundays. And besides attending the English Church, regularly, we used to have 'religious instruction' from the clergyman; so that we were well looked after in that respect. But those were glorious days! we might do almost any thing we liked. Cara and I used to get a little table to ourselves, and write home, and talk about

you all, until we almost fancied we were back in dear old England again."

"Only sometimes," Cara went on, "we used to be worried with those lessons that we had to prepare for Mr. Goodman; usen't we? You know, auntie, although as a rule we enjoyed doing them very much, yet sometimes they were so odd that we could not make them out at all."

"Odd! were they?" said Aunt Amy, laughing at Cara's rueful face; "come let us hear an example of their oddity."

"Well, auntie, for one thing we used to be told that we were all wicked by nature; and when I asked if Mr. Goodman meant everybody, even our darling little baby sister (for I could not believe that), he looked very grave and said, 'my child, the Bible says that all are sinners; and what that says must be true.' But I know this," Cara went on excitedly, "if I were born bad, and am bad by nature, it can't be expected of me to do right; so there, auntie, don't be surprised if I turn out a thief or a murderess, or some such thing: but no matter, I can't and won't believe it; and I don't care who knows it!" finished she, drawing herself up, all flushed and heated by her little speech.

"Gently, darling, gently!" said Aunt Pollie, "we don't want you to be a thief or a murderess either; so you need not argue as if you thought we did."

"But you are right in this," added Aunt Amy—"never believe any thing about God's laws, no matter on what authority, if your conscience tells you it is wrong. Our Heavenly Father is so good and so loving that we must rather believe any thing to be in error than that He

would make laws contrary to what we feel, in our inmost souls, to be right."

"But, auntie," said May gravely, "If the Bible says so?"

"Even in that case, May, we must have faith in God's goodness and love above all else; and if we find places in the Bible that ascribe any other attributes to God our Heavenly Father, except the very highest that our souls can realize; then, in all loving reverence for that grand old book, we must decline to accept as absolute truth any such statement, rather believing that the book is in error, than that He should be."

Here May opened her large eyes and looked rather horrified as she said very slowly, "Then, auntie, don't you believe in the Bible?"

"That depends, dear, on what you mean by belief in the Bible. I do most firmly believe that it is a beautiful book, and full of valuable lessons for us all; but I don't suppose that I believe in it in the same way as Mr. Goodman does. Tell me, what does he say about it?"

"He says," answered May, after thinking for awhile, "that the Bible is the word of God, given by Him to certain good men, who were so inspired that they could only write what He, as it were, dictated to them."

"But I could never understand how he came to know that," broke in Cara; "for when I asked him, he always said we must believe, not question."

Here their elder sister, a lively girl of seventeen, exclaimed, "Well! we have changed the conversation, haven't we? We began about your doings at Paris, and now I declare we are getting into quite a serious vein!"

"But," added her cousin Mary, "now that we are on this subject, I want to ask you, auntie, one question that has often puzzled me. At school, we were always taught so much 'religion,' as it was called; but you rarely, if ever, speak to us of it. At first I fancied that it was because you did not care for such things; but since then I have heard you speaking seriously together, and have seen you reading religious books; so I know you do think about them; and then it has seemed strange that you did not want us to think too!"

"It would have been strange indeed, dear," answered Aunt Amy, "if we had not wished you to think, as you say. But it was just for the opposite reason that we have not spoken to you on this subject before. We were afraid that if we spoke too soon, the ground would not be fully prepared, and then the seed would not bear good fruit."

"How do you mean, auntie?" asked May.

"I will try to explain. Suppose I gave you a glass of pure spring water to drink when you were not at all thirsty, what would you do?"

"If I were not thirsty," answered May, "no matter how good it was, I should say I did not want it, and put it down. It would be of no use to me."

"But if you came home hot and thirsty from a long walk, and I offered you the water, what then?"

"Ah! then, auntie, I daresay I should drink it all up and ask for more."

"Quite right, dear; and that illustrates my meaning exactly. If, before your mind was sufficiently prepared, we talked to you about spiritual things, you would not have taken them into your hearts; but now, if you

really want to think about them, we will do our best to help you to find that spring of living water that is ever flowing for those who seek it. What do you say, now, to coming here every Sunday afternoon for awhile, so that we may try to find solutions for some of those puzzling things of which May and Cara complain?"

"That would be nice."—"We should like it very much," cried the four girls at once.

"And," added Mary, "may some of our cousins come too?"

"Certainly, Mary; we shall be glad to see as many as like to come, but on this condition only, remember! that they themselves desire it, and are really longing after religious truth."

FIRST SUNDAY.

CONVERSATION ON THE BIBLE.

"Now, auntie, we are ready," said Cara, when a group of seven or eight young people were seated comfortably round the fire. "How and where are we to begin?"

"I think," answered Aunt Amy, "we had better begin where we left off the other day, with an inquiry into what the Bible really is, and why we value it so highly? You, May, gave us a very good explanation of what many people believe about it; but it is not that which we believe to be the correct one."

"But before we begin," said Aunt Pollie, "let us remind you that, as each one of us has been endowed with the divine gift of Reason, it is our bounden duty to use it to the utmost, each one for him or herself. At the same time we must remember that our knowledge is so limited and our liability to make mistakes so apparent, that we must be careful not to consider our views as final or as *absolutely true*. We are seeking after the truth still, and may well liken our search to Jacob's dream. We may imagine ourselves ascending the ladder of truth, which reaches to Heaven; and as we mount higher and higher we must be careful to plant our feet firmly, lest we lose our footing and fall headlong down. We shall hear many voices around us giving contrary directions: on the one hand we shall be told, 'Do not linger so cautiously; do not mind trampling under foot any thing

that impedes your progress ;' while, on the other, voices will be clamouring around us, 'Go up no further ; it is dangerous ground ; if you venture yet higher you will assuredly be lost.' I say we must listen to none of these outside voices, but only to that sweet inward monitor who bids us go bravely yet cautiously on our way. Thus shall we make our way to the summit, even though at times we are footsore and weary."

"Yes, indeed," added Aunt Amy, "Onward and Upward must ever be our motto. And now I will tell you why we admire and reverence the Bible. First, then, we value it because it contains the most ancient history we possess of the old Hebrew nation, and brings us into direct contact with it, showing us how its people's idea of a God gradually became purer and better, until that glorious time when Christ came and gave them a higher conception ; and, secondly, because some parts of it contain so many valuable truths and lessons, that our hearts and consciences cannot fail to recognize their intrinsic worth."

"You say parts, auntie ; is it not all valuable ?" asked Ernest, a quiet thoughtful lad who had joined the party this afternoon.

"In a certain way it is, but not all equally so to us," returned his aunt. "For instance, many parts require a great deal of study to enable them to be properly understood. You know (do you not ?) that the Bible consists of a number of books, written at different times, in different languages, and under different circumstances."

"How, then, did they come to be all put together, auntie," asked May.

"Ah ! you may well ask that question ; for one is too

apt to imagine that they were always in the form we now have them. The fact is, the Bible may be divided into three parts:—our Old Testament, which contains almost all the earliest Hebrew writings until the year 440 B.C., collected by Ezra, or in his time; the Apocrypha, the further Hebrew literature until the birth of Christ; and the New Testament, which consists of some of the religious writings of the first two centuries after Christ.”

“I never heard of the Apocrypha,” said Cara; “is that part of the Bible?”

“The Romish Church considers that it is so; but Protestants do not class it with the inspired books; nevertheless, they consider it second only to these, and many bibles contain it. In Luther’s version the Apocrypha is always put in, I believe.”

“Did you not say, auntie,” asked Mary, “that the New Testament contained only some of the religious records of the times just after Christ? Where are the rest?”

“Some of them no longer exist; others are bound up in an apocryphal testament, a collection of books that have but very little merit. According to an old tradition, the bible, as we now have it, was arranged by the council of Nicea, A.D. 325. It was supposed that ‘the Canonical and Apocryphal books were placed near the Holy Table with a prayer that the canonical might be found above and the others below.’ ‘This,’ Dean Stanley goes on to say after telling us the story, ‘was, no doubt, a mere popular representation. It is a mark of the wisdom of the Nicene, and, indeed, of all the early councils, that they never ventured to define the limits of the sacred books.’

“Again, it is said by some that these limits were de-

fined at the council of Laodicea in the fourth century ; but in that list, Mr. Higginson tells us, the book of Revelation is not mentioned, and one or two of the apocryphal ones are added to the Old Testament. But whether this list be true or false, we have always the testimony of the Latin Fathers to guide us ; and if we read the various lists they give, we shall see that each one judged for himself in the matter ; and although we find they were agreed in the main, yet about the reliability of some of the books they were divided in opinion—as, for instance, in the case of the book of Revelation, the Epistle to the Hebrews, 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, and Jude.”

“Then,” said Cara, “there could have been no very strong line of demarcation between the accepted and rejected books if the heads of the church were at variance about them.”

“Exactly ; and that is why I cannot think that they are any thing more than human writings. Otherwise there must surely have been a divine impress on them.”

“But, auntie,” asked Ernest, “if God did not inspire men to write in some special way, why do people imagine that He did ?”

“It does appear strange, I must admit. But you know that in early times people believed more ‘personally’ in God, if I may call it so ; they imagined that He was constantly working marvels out of the order of Nature. Miracles were common occurrences in those days, in the eyes of the people ; early histories, as you know, abound in them ; and every thing good and great was supposed to be sent by God in some special way. There was something very beautiful in such a belief—implying a childlike admiration of His wonderful Pro-

vidence. It reminds me of the love a little child has for his father. He loves him, and, not being able to comprehend the whole wisdom of his doings, has often strange ideas concerning him—ideas that, as he grows older, he will lose, but only to have a truer and better conception of him. So with the ideas of God, although it was very beautiful to believe that He would interpose in some special cases, and thus show His Love and Mercy, yet surely it is grander to feel that His Laws are so perfect that they need no altering, and His Love so sure that we are all safe in His hands. But to return to our subject. People now accept the Bible as being literally true, usually, I think, because the Church teaches that it is so. They have also other reasons; but perhaps the best plan for you to do will be to ask that question of some of your friends who believe in this infallibility; and then, later on, we will consider what they say, and see if the ground on which they hold their belief seems to us to be tenable or not."

"That will be the best way, I am sure," said Aunt Pollie, "because then you will hear both sides of the question and be able to judge more fairly for yourselves."

"I think, however," Aunt Amy went on, "that I can give you some reasons that may have done much to bring this idea about. From time immemorial it has been the custom to deify every thing that is good and great. Did not the ancient nations worship the many works of God, and make idols of the powerful sun, the chaste and placid moon, and the shining stars? Abraham, we are told, was the first to realize that there was One higher than all these glorious creations, even the Mighty Being from whom all Nature sprung. The

Hebrews, although in the main they worshipped like their father Abraham, were constantly found slipping away from his simple worship to associate with that of the surrounding nations. Again, the Romans deified each hero; and it was therefore no marvel that the Jews, who were so closely connected with them, learned to do the same; so that, in process of time, not merely Christ, our great Example and Leader, but afterwards his mother and then the Pope came to be regarded as supernatural. After a while came Luther, who purified the Church of many errors; but in his turn he so extolled the Bible as almost to make that a God. Since his time this Bible-worship has so much increased, that people are afraid to question any word that it contains for fear of shattering their idol."

"Oh! auntie, what would Mr. Goodman say if he heard you talk like this?" exclaimed Cara.

"Why, he would probably say I do not believe in or value the Bible properly; but I cannot help thinking that they show the truest love for it who are not afraid to test its truth to the utmost; for, as Max Müller says, 'He must be a man of little faith, who would fear to subject his own religion to the same critical test as that to which the historian subjects all other religions. We need not surely crave a tender or merciful treatment for that faith which we hold to be the only true one. We should rather challenge for it the severest tests and trials, as the sailor would for the good ship to which he intrusts his own life and the lives of those who are most dear to him.'"

"Ah!" said Cara, "I think I understand. At school when my work was not properly done, I was

always afraid of its being examined; but when it was really good I did not mind how much it was looked at."

"And," added May, "when cousin Mary sent me one of her drawings, I was so proud of it that I showed it to everybody, even to the drawing-master; for it was so beautifully done that I knew they could not find fault."

"That's right," returned Aunt Amy; "and so with the Bible. If we regard it in the proper way, we shall find it to be so valuable that we shall not mind any one examining it; and if some things appear to us mistaken or imperfect, why it is only what we must expect from the early history of a nation; for surely the teaching of Christ and the civilization of the world ought to have made us a little more enlightened than were our ancestors; and we trace with interest the progress they gradually made—from the earliest ages when they regarded their God as a Powerful and Revengeful Deity, only to be obeyed from fear, until the time when Christ came to point Him out as our loving Heavenly Father, who wills not that the least of His little ones should perish."

"Do let me ask you one more question, auntie," said Mary, as she saw Aunt Amy glancing at the clock at the conclusion of her sentence. "People say you must believe in the Bible or you cannot be saved; why is that?"

"I believe," answered her aunt, "that they think the Bible commands it, and they bring forth many texts in proof of their assertion—forgetting, perhaps, that at the time that these words were written, the

Bible, as we now have it, did not exist, and could not, therefore, have been the 'Scriptures' referred to by the writer. Take, for instance, that oft quoted passage 'Search the Scriptures, for in them ye have eternal life.' These words undoubtedly referred to the Old Testament; for the Gospels were not all written then; and if we accept that alone as vital truth, we deny that Christ's life and teaching were of fundamental importance, a denial which those who urge this text would assuredly be the last to make."

"Then, auntie, why do so many people continue to believe in the divine inspiration of the Bible, when there seems so little reason for it?"

"Ah! there are many reasons for it. You forget that for several centuries this belief has been growing, and people have gone on appealing to the Scriptures in support of every doctrine they may hold, until at last they have encased it so completely in dogma, that it is difficult to free it from its chains. Besides, it is always a very hard matter to get rid of old beliefs that are so closely connected with old and tender associations. People imagine that if they question beliefs that their fathers and mothers held to be true, they will be showing a disrespect for their memories; although we know that if they had acted in a like manner in other matters besides theology, all progress would have been completely stopped.

"Others there are who are too timid to form an opinion for themselves. They are afraid that if they once begin to think on such matters, the demon of doubt (as they term it) will lead them on until they lose hold of all that is good and true. Surely such

have but little real faith in God, or they would know that he who seeketh truth in all earnestness and humility, will in due time approach nearer to Him.

"There is another class of people, who do not question any belief that they may have been taught, either because they are too indolent to do so, or because their time is taken up with other matters. These prefer to have their religion cut out ready for them, and certainly do not follow Christ's command, 'Work out your own salvation.'"

"And now," said Aunt Pollie, "we really must finish our chat for to-day; for the time has run on so that Mamma will wonder why you are not home."

"Yes," added Aunt Amy, "we must say good-bye for to day; and next Sunday we will talk a little about the Old Testament."

SECOND SUNDAY.

THE OLD TESTAMENT.

"Now, auntie, do begin to tell us about the Old Testament as you promised," said Cara, speaking in her usual impetuous way; "we want to know where the books came from, who wrote them, and in fact every thing you know."

"Every thing!" said Aunt Amy smiling; "I am afraid even that every thing would not be much; and besides I do not want, as I have before said, to cut out your religion for you, but only to excite your thirst for such things, and perhaps help you to find the path that will lead to the well of living water. And let me again remind you that you must not believe as absolute truth what I say; you must sift it for yourselves, and see what agrees with your conception of the truth, and accept only that which does so agree. Do not be afraid to doubt. Tennyson says truly:—

‘There lives more faith in honest doubt,
Believe me, than in half the creeds.’

This applies, of course be it understood, to that doubt which is the result of reverent religious thought. Again recall Christ's words, 'Work out your own salvation: don't leave it to priests or to any one else; think for yourselves, and use that divine gift of reason to the best of your power; at the same time use it reverently, and with true modesty, ever according to others that freedom of thought that you claim for yourselves.

' Who with another's eye can read
Or worship by another's creed ?
Revering God's commands alone,
We humbly seek and use our own.'

And now let us talk about the Old Testament and of what it is composed."

"With the exception, perhaps, of parts of Ezra and Daniel, the whole of it was originally written in Hebrew. After the conquests of Alexander the Great in the East, Greek became the general language; and in the year 277 B.C. Ptolemy Philadelphius, of Egypt, had the various books translated into that language, in order to add them to a library that had been commenced by his father."

"Wait a minute, auntie; I want to ask you a question about that," said Mary. "Was it not given to seventy-two men to translate, each one of whom was shut up in a separate cell; and then, when the versions were afterwards compared, all the copies were found to be exactly alike. I know we learnt that at school, and it is brought forward as a proof that the Bible must be divine; for God must have inspired the translators to do the work so correctly that no differences were to be found in their several versions."

"Unfortunately for the truth of that story, Mary, dear," replied her aunt, "we find that these translations were by no means perfect; for a great many mistakes are to be found in them. But, like almost every legend, it is founded upon fact. I believe Ptolemy Philadelphius chose six men from each of the twelve tribes, and divided the Scriptures that were to be translated among them; and from there having been

seventy-two men employed in the work, it was called the Septuagint version, and gave rise to this strange story."

"Then is it the Septuagint version that we use?" asked Ernest.

"Yes; it was translated into English in the reign of King James. But since his time so many words have lost or changed their meaning, and, besides, the original languages in which the Bible was written are now so much better understood, that it has been deemed necessary to have a fresh translation; and at this time some of our most learned scholars are engaged in preparing one."

"Well, then," said Mary, "surely it is not right to build up doctrines on any phrase contained in the Bible, even supposing that the original were divinely inspired; for it may not be a correct translation."

"I do not think it is right to do so," returned Aunt Amy. "It seems to me to be one of the mistakes which is the result of this Bible-worship, as it has been called. No! we must try to read the Bible in a broader sense, so as to get the true spirit of it; our reason and common sense will help to teach us what to accept as truth, without at the same time degrading the loftiest ideal of our Heavenly Father by bringing Him down to a level with the earliest conceptions people had of Him—conceptions that were natural in the infancy of the world, but which are surely a disgrace for us to entertain in our day. And now let us notice the Old Testament a little more closely. Who can tell me who wrote the Book of Genesis?"

"Why, Moses," exclaimed two or three voices at

once; "every one knows that he wrote the first five books of the Bible; the Pentateuch, is it not?"

"Oh! no," said Mary; "he could not have written all of them, because Deuteronomy finishes with an account of his death."

"But he did," answered May; "he wrote it all except just those few last verses, which were added afterwards; at least, I know that was what we were told," added she, seeing that Aunt Amy looked as though she did not quite agree with her.

"That certainly was the prevailing idea until within the last few years," returned her aunt; "but now men who have made these books the objects of great study, have come to the conclusion that Moses could not have been the author of them."

"How very strange!" said Cara. "Do you know what led them to think this?"

"They had several reasons. For instance, towns are there mentioned which did not exist until after Moses's death. Also certain existing places are called by names which were given to them at a later date."

"But," interrupted Ernest, "if Moses did not write the Pentateuch, who did?"

"Well, those scholars who have gone into the matter are, for the most part, agreed, I think, that they are a collection of the historical records, legends, and traditions of the early Hebrews, which were put together perhaps by Samuel or somewhere about his time. The exact date is unknown; but all seem to concur in thinking that it must have been compiled long after Moses died."

"They believe, then," said Ernest, "that these books

are not the original work of any one man ; what is their reason for doing so ? ”

“Partly because our Hebrew scholars tell us that there are so many different styles and varieties of composition ; we are told, for instance, that whereas in some cases the word God is rendered by Jehovah, in the adjoining chapter He is mentioned as Elohim, showing that the different accounts were written at different times. In Colenso’s Pentateuch we find numerous instances of these varieties, which I hope you will one day read for yourselves. But we may, without the learning of these great men, see many instances of this for ourselves. If we read carefully we often find two descriptions of the same narrative, sometimes differing only in detail, at others absolutely contradicting each other. Turn to Gen. vi. for a moment, and read the account of the flood. How many of each kind of animal is Noah commanded to take into the Ark ? ”

“I have found it,” cried May, “it tells us in the 19th and 20th verses. Two of each kind, auntie,” added she, after reading those verses to herself.

“Why, of course,” added Cara, “there is no need to look for it: every child knows that there were two of a sort ; their Noah’s Ark plaything teaches them that.”

“Not so fast, Cara ; turn to the next chapter and read aloud the first six verses.”

Cara did so, and looked puzzled. “Seven of all clean kinds, and two of the others. What a strange contradiction ! ”

“Yes, indeed ! and, notice, each account finishes with the words, ‘And Noah did according to all that God had commanded him.’ Now, how can we believe that both

these accounts were written by the same man? he surely would not contradict himself. No! the only sensible solution that I can see is that they were two versions of the same event, which were put into one collection. But this is only one example. During the week read carefully the first three chapters of Genesis, and tell me next Sunday whether you do not find two distinct accounts of the creation."

"That is curious," said May; "but how is it we haven't noticed it before, I wonder; for we have often read them."

"I have no doubt," answered Aunt Amy, "that you fell into the same mistake that so many others do. People are apt to read the Bible straight on, accepting it all without question, and thus miss many important points and valuable pieces of knowledge. They are so impressed with the idea that every thing in the Bible is to be believed as absolute truth, and not to be reasoned about, that they get into the habit of simply reading the words, and supposing that passages the sense of which they cannot comprehend are mysteries, to be accepted as such.

"And now, during the week try to read carefully the first few chapters of Genesis; and we will talk about them next Sunday."

THIRD SUNDAY.

THE FIRST CHAPTERS OF GENESIS.

"I SEE you have something to tell us, Mary," said Aunt Amy, when all were assembled the following Sunday; "you have been reading some of the Book of Genesis, I suppose."

"Yes, indeed, auntie; and it is so strange! Why! there are two distinct accounts of the Creation given. I never noticed the differences before."

"I daresay not; but if we read the first three chapters carefully we shall soon perceive that it is so. The first account, you may notice, finishes at the third verse of the second chapter; and then another description begins. In the first account God is declared to have created man and woman at the same time, and after all the rest of His creatures (Gen. i. 27); while in the other He is supposed to have created Adam before the beasts of the field and Eve afterwards (Gen. ii. 7, 19, 21, 22)."

"That is so, I see," said Ernest; "but what does it matter? It surely does not make much difference which was supposed to have been created first."

"No, Ernest; to us it matters very little, because we believe that these accounts simply tell us what were the ideas of the old Hebrews about the origin of the world; but do you not see that it plainly confronts the belief entertained by so many, that it is a divinely inspired, and therefore an absolutely true, account of the creation of the world. This notion is so widely spread, and seems

to me to do so much mischief in making people twist and contort what is written into something else, that I believe it to be the duty of those who disagree to speak boldly, and try at least to rescue the Bible from what appears to them to be the toils of superstition. Some declare that they who analyze the book in this way, really destroy its beauty; but, in my own case, I feel sure that I have appreciated it far more since I allowed my powers of thought to bear upon it, than I did when I simply read it through without question."

"Yes," added Aunt Pollie. "The way that so many people have of reading the chapters straight on is very curious. They seem to think that the reading of the words is in itself a sort of talisman, and that it would be infinite presumption on their part to attempt to understand it. Although, as they truly say, our powers of understanding are only small and limited, still we must make use of them as much as we can. Christ tells us that the man is guilty who neglects even his one talent; therefore if we do not use ours we are culpable; and not only this, but, like the neglected talent, the value of a most divine gift, if suffered to lie dormant, will be taken away altogether."

"Then, auntie, about this account of the creation. If you do not accept it as a literal statement of facts, how do you regard it?" asked Ernest.

"I believe," answered Aunt Amy, "that it is a beautiful legend of the old Jewish nation to account for the existence of this world. In all nations and peoples there has always been a natural desire to discover how they, and all that surrounded them, came into being; and thus legends have everywhere sprung

up to explain the plan of creation in one way or another.

“Max Müller, in his ‘Chips from a German Workshop,’ gives a curious legend of an old South-American race (the Quichés of Vera Cruz) that accounts for these phenomena in their way. At first, the story begins, there was but sea and sky. Then the earth was made, the light, and afterwards the brute creation. But the Gods were disappointed; for the animals could not speak to praise them; and therefore they were condemned to the woods and crags. The Gods then formed a man whose flesh was of earth. But he was without cohesion or power, inert and aqueous; he could not turn his head; his sight was dim; and though he had the gift of speech, he had no intellect. He was soon consumed again in the waters. And the Gods consulted a second time, and, after some magic ceremonies, formed men of wood. They had no heart, no intellect, and no recollection of their maker; so they withered, and were swallowed up in the waters. Then followed a third creation, and man was made of a certain tree and woman of the marrow of a reed. They, too, were defective, and were swept away. Then all nature—animals, trees, and stones—turned against man; and the only remnant of that early race is to be found in the small monkeys that still live in the forests. But now once more the Gods tried, and this time were quite successful. Four men were created who could reason and speak; their sight was unlimited; and they knew all things at once. When they had rendered thanks to the Creator for their existence, the Gods were frightened lest they should become as powerful as their Makers;

and therefore breathed a cloud over the eyes of the men, so that they could see a certain distance only. Then, when they fell asleep, the gods gave them beautiful wives; and these became the mothers of all tribes, great and small."

"That is a strange story!" said Cara, laughing.

"Do you notice any thing particular in it?" asked Aunt Amy.

"Yes, auntie," answered Ernest; "the Gods could not succeed in their attempt at once, but had to try again and again."

"And how is it in the Hebrew version?"

"In that," answered May, "every thing that was made was 'very good' at once."

"That is right. The characteristic that underlies the whole history of the Jewish faith was simple trust and firm reliance in the God they worshipped; and in no place does it show itself more clearly than it does here. This story of the creation, as also that of the Fall and others, was probably composed by the old Hebrew poets. We may imagine those wandering tribes resting in some shady spot, away from the glare and heat of the midday sun, listening with delight to the rapturous songs of their bards, who sung to them not only of their country's heroes, but of the marvels of nature that surrounded them.

"How simple and majestic was their song of the Creation!

"Chaos reigns; every thing is in disorder. The Mighty Creator proclaims silence; and immediately the turbulent elements obey His voice, and the work of Creation begins. First are called forth the light and

darkness, next the land and sky, which, you must know, was at that time supposed to be a firm solid covering (*firmament*), and the stars but little crevices that let through glimpses of a glorious heaven beyond. Then every thing else comes forth at the Divine command; and 'behold it was very good.'

"How truly beautiful and full of trust must have been the spirit that could thus have accounted for the wonders of the universal scheme! Regarded as a bare statement of facts, the narrative is, doubtless, full of imperfections; but looking at it as an ancient legend of an ancient people, how full it is of dignity and beauty. 'Behold it was very good.'"

"Yes," added Aunt Pollie, "many may learn a lesson here! We constantly hear people (religious people, they believe themselves to be) reviling human nature and speaking of it as if it were all naturally bad. What is this but blasphemy against our Creator? Well would it be for them to turn to this glorious old legend, and feel too that it is all 'very good.' Is not man the noblest known work of God? and must he not therefore be divine? Surely the feeling that this is so must be his greatest incentive to goodness; the gratitude he feels for having been enriched by a nature competent of being developed into all that is good and great, will do more to elevate his life than any amount of self-abasement—an abasement that cannot fail to reflect dishonour upon his Maker."

"And now let us pass on to the account of the Fall," said Aunt Amy. "Who will give us the story?"

"I will," said Mary. "We are told that God placed

Adam and Eve in a beautiful garden, and gave them permission to gather any fruit they pleased, except from one tree—the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But the serpent came and tempted Eve to taste it ; so she gathered it and gave some to her husband. Then God, for their disobedience, thrust them out of the garden, putting Angels with flaming swords to keep them out, and, as a further punishment, made them work and sent death into the world.”

“Thank you, Mary ; you have told us the story very well. You must remember, however, that death was not supposed to have been sent as a punishment exactly ; out because, being now able to discern good from evil, God was afraid lest man might rival him (Gen. iii. 22, 23). A childlike, simple notion, truly ! Now let us try to enter into the spirit of the old Jewish poets who composed it. This wise and mighty God who had ordered Creation so well, how were they to reconcile his goodness with the pain and evil that existed everywhere ? It must have been some punishment inflicted by Him for some wrongdoing, they probably thought. And so the story grew. The serpent (emblem of cunning and deceit) tempted Eve to disobedience ; and she, anxious to possess a knowledge of good and evil, suffered herself to be overcome and picked the fruit and ate it, giving some to her husband. For this disobedience they were chased from the garden, lest they, knowing good from evil, should eat of the tree of life and live for ever. Work was to be their lot, and also that of their descendants. Now you see, in this legend, the old Hebrews found a solution to many of the mysteries of life—namely, the power of acquiring knowledge, and the

presence of evil, work, and death in the world. And a very pretty story they made of it—although, to my mind, it is far inferior to that of the Creation; for it supposes God to be of a much lower nature.”

“Then, auntie, I suppose you would put it more on a level with some of the old German and Norse stories, that are supposed to offer solutions to some of the phenomena of nature?” asked Cara.

“Yes, I think the same spirit of inquiry gave rise to all these tales; only you must remember that the greater antiquity of the former, and the immense influence they have had in the world, must make them command more of our attention.”

“But, auntie!” said May, “why don’t you believe the account given to be really a true statement?”

“Because, my dear, my reason and faith in God forbid it. Let us see what such an acceptance really involves. In the first place, if we regard God as the author of all, how can we account for the existence of the serpent, or of Satan, which is the popular idea of the serpent? If God made him, how can we reconcile such a diabolical work with His goodness in every thing else? What was the use of all else being perfect, if He created something to counteract so completely that perfection? Again, why did Eve take the apple? was it not that she might know good from evil?—a laudable desire surely! and although she attained it by wrong means, still it was scarcely just to call down such terrible punishment upon her as is supposed here. Finally, work is spoken of as a curse! Is this right? Do we not all feel that, properly carried out, it is one of the greatest blessings we possess? We all know how unbearable it is to have

nothing to do; indeed men have often gone mad if they have been imprisoned and allowed no employment; therefore we cannot accept this as a curse of God."

"Besides," continued Aunt Pollie, "how unjust our Heavenly Father is made to appear in this story. Just conceive for a moment what we should think of an earthly father who, because one of his children did wrong, punished all the rest. Should we not say it was flagrant injustice? and what would be wrong for us to do, would be an impossibility in a just and wise God who ordereth all things well."

"Ah!" said Cara, "that always did strike me as being very unjust; but once when I said something of the kind to Mr. Goodman, he was quite shocked. He said that God's ways were not our ways, and that we must not question them."

"Yes," replied Aunt Amy, "I know many people say so; and though I thoroughly agree with them in thinking that we can have but a dim comprehension of the beauties of the Divine character, that our purest ideas of all that is good and great fall far short of the reality, till I feel convinced that it differs only in degree, and that nothing that is not good and just can be true of our wise Creator.

"And now that I have given you my reasons for preferring to accept these stories as legends of an ancient people, in all their religious and poetic beauty, rather than a literal statement of facts, I shall leave you to ponder over the subject for yourselves; and next Sunday we will consider the other stories that seem to me to have grown up to account for other natural phenomena."

FOURTH SUNDAY.

THE FLOOD AND THE TOWER OF BABEL.

"LAST Sunday we spoke about two of the stories that, we believe, were called into existence to account for some of the phenomena in nature; there are yet two more that seem to me to come under the same category. Who can tell me which I mean?" asked Aunt Amy, looking round.

"Do you mean the flood, with its account of the origin of the rainbow?" asked Mary.

"That is one of them," returned her aunt.

"And the other is the confusion of tongues at the building of the Tower of Babel, is it not?" said Cara.

"Yes, those are the two that we will speak about this afternoon.

"First, then, the history of the flood, a story which, I have no doubt, was founded on fact. We know that, from time to time, the waters of large rivers overflow and do much mischief to the surrounding country. As people did not then understand the reason of these sudden inundations, they must have wondered much about them, and considered, very likely, that some interference on God's part with the laws of nature was necessary to have accomplished them. As the overflowing often destroyed much property and also life, it was usually supposed to be a chastisement sent by God to punish His people for some fault. And it is from circumstances such as these that, I think, this story may perhaps have arisen."

"But I thought, auntie," said Ernest, "that the history of the universal flood was proved to be true, because, among so many nations, pictures or historical records are found mentioning a like occurrence."

"There are certainly many nations who speak of a similar event; for these floods occurred in many lands and naturally left a deep impression on the minds of the people. Against the assertion, however, that any of these was universal, we have the testimony of nature; for she tells us, through our botanists and geologists, that a universal flood could not have taken place."

"Besides, auntie," said Mary, "the writer of this story could not possibly know what was going on in the other parts of the world, unless God plainly told him; and if He had, surely the account of it would have been more definite, and there would not have been those discrepancies that you pointed out the other day."

"Just so," answered Aunt Amy. "And, again, I should have thought that the writer would have been very careful to explain that God had thus dictated the matter to him, if such were the case; but we find very few passages that can be said to point at all to the fact of its divine origin. It seems to me a great pity to accept these pretty stories as absolute truth; their beauty is lost in the endeavour to force a strained meaning upon them, so as to account not only for the discrepancies, but, what is far more important, the comparatively mean opinion the writers must have had of their Creator, in thinking that His works were so imperfect that they might be 'repented of.'"

"Then, auntie," said Cara, "will you please tell us

the story as you understand it, like you did that of the Creation."

"If you wish it, certainly," replied Aunt Amy.

"The Hebrew poets tell us that the world became very wicked—indeed so much so that their Maker repented that He had ever made them; and so He determined to destroy all by a flood. (This rather reminds us of the Quiché account, does it not?) There was but one righteous man in the world; and he was to be saved. God commanded him to build an ark and to go into it, together with his family and a certain number of every living thing. This man (Noah) did all that God commanded him; and he was no sooner safely inside the ark, than the rains descended and the floods came and swept every thing from the face of the earth. When the destruction was fully complete, the waters were allowed to abate and Noah came out of the ark again. Then he offered sacrifices of thanksgiving unto God for delivering him, and at the same time entreated this Mighty One to promise never to destroy His creatures again by water. Moved by the earnest supplications of Noah, the promise was given; and, in token of it, God sent the rainbow. Here, I take it, is the most beautiful part of the story. The rainbow is chosen as an emblem of God's peace—heaven's arch as it is sometimes called. Can we not well imagine the religious rapture with which all must have watched this wonderful appearance; and although science has since taught us that it is the effect of a natural law, we can still admire and reverence the simple faith that taught that ancient people to give it such a glorious signification."

"And what a lesson may we learn from this," said Aunt Pollie. "If in those times people had such faith and trust in God, knowing so little of His universal wisdom, how much more ought we to have, who are shown in so many ways, that the events which in olden times were held to be simply supernatural are the effects of grand, wise, and beneficent laws, always in operation around us. If it be wonderful to alter laws, how much more wonderful to know that those laws are so perfect that they can be adapted to every time and place, and have no need ever to be disturbed or set aside."

"There is only one more story here, I think," Aunt Amy continued, "that belongs to the same category as the last three; and that is the account of the Tower of Babel. This is inferior in poetic beauty, I consider, to the others; but it is noticeable because it shows the way in which the ancients explained the existence of the varieties of language. We are told that after the deluge the people were determined to build a tower so high, that in case of another such calamity, they should have some place wherein to take shelter. God, however, being determined to punish their presumption in thus supposing that they could evade His power, confounded their speech, and made them unable to understand each other. As they could therefore no longer work together, they left the building and went their different ways, thus originating the various nations, each one speaking a separate language."

"Did you notice that in the 5th verse of the 11th chapter, God is said to 'come down' to see what was built?" asked Ernest.

"Yes," replied Aunt Amy. "The evident idea of a God at that time was that He moved about from one place to another, and was, in fact, like a mighty king among them. The writer also represents Him as speaking to other Gods; for in the seventh verse we have the words, 'Let us go down,' &c. Some people affirm that this passage proves the Trinity; but to me, it seems simply an indication of the times when it was written—when the Hebrews were somewhat imbued with the religion of the nations among which they dwelt, a religion that was polytheistic."

"You have quite passed over the story of Cain and Abel," said Cara. "Why have you said nothing about them?"

"Simply because I do not intend to go through the Bible with you. I only want to point your attention to certain portions of it, and then leave you to read it for yourselves and form your own opinion. But since you mention the story, I should like to say a few words about it. Some persons are fond of affirming that the hideous crime of murder as set forth in this history clearly shows the effect of Adam's sin and fall, for in Cain we find the first example of original sin. I cannot agree with these sentiments; for if that were so, how comes it that the sin excites so much abhorrence? If Cain's nature was so depraved, in consequence of Adam's sin, so must have been also the nature of all then living; for the atonement was as yet far distant: murder and crimes of all kinds would then have been the order of the day, to be regarded as natural occurrences. But how dreadful is the crime of murder here made to appear! No one in civilized times could paint

more graphically, or with more repugnance, this terrible scene. And therefore to me this story seems to illustrate most beautifully how the Divine spark is ever present in humanity: and the awful punishment, which was allowed by all (even by the wretched man himself) to be well merited, shows that man has something within his soul that makes him abhor evil-doing. This divine spark will, I trust, in time illumine our whole nature, so that our every action will be kindled by the purifying flame of love!

“And now that we have just touched upon these early chapters of Genesis, we come to the life of Abraham, with whom, it is considered, the really historical part begins. Perhaps the best thing we can do will be to take the lives of the two greatest Jewish leaders, Abraham and Moses. There is not time to begin a fresh subject this afternoon; so we will finish for to-day, and next Sunday will try to find out something about the life of Abraham.”

FIFTH SUNDAY.

ABRAHAM.

"Who can tell me any thing about Abraham?" asked Aunt Amy the next Sunday afternoon, when her little party had assembled.

"He was the son of Terah, and chief of one of the wandering tribes," said Ernest (referring to Genesis xi. and xii.), "who, obeying God's command, left Ur of the Chaldees to go to Canaan."

"That is quite right," replied his aunt; "and now, as we always feel much more interested if we know something of the habits of those about whom we are speaking, I should like to read to you what Dean Stanley says on the subject, in his History of the Jewish Church. He tells us that the tribe of Abraham differed but very little from the Arabs of the present day, and says:—'Such as we see them now, starting on a pilgrimage or a journey, were Abraham and his sister's son, when they "went forth" to go into the land of Canaan. All their substance that they had gathered is heaped high on the backs of their kneeling camels. The "slaves that they had bought in Haran," run along by their sides. Round about them are their flocks of sheep and goats, and the asses moving underneath the towering forms of the camels. The chief is there, amidst the stir of movement, or resting at noon within his black tent, marked out from the rest by his cloak of brilliant scarlet, by the fillet of rope which binds the loose handkerchief round his head, by the spear which

how have I erred in worshipping you ! You too, I see, obey the laws of One greater than yourselves ; henceforward, therefore, will I pay homage only to the Mighty Power who hath created all things.' ”

“ What a beautiful story ! ” said Mary. “ Do you think it is true ? ”

“ It may possibly be, ” answered Aunt Amy. “ We know that he lived among nations who worshipped the sun and moon and fire, and that he learnt to differ from them ; so that it is quite likely that he was led to do so in something of the manner here described. ”

“ At any rate, ” said Cara, “ he thought for himself, and did not accept the theology of those around without question. ”

“ That he did not ! ” Aunt Pollie exclaimed ; “ and there he sets us a good example truly ! In fact all great reformers have done likewise, as we see in the lives of Moses, Luther, and, above all, in Christ. ”

“ You were saying a little while ago, auntie, that you considered the book of Genesis to be a collection of separate traditions, histories, and legends, ” said Cara. “ When I was reading through the history of Abraham, I could not help thinking that, if this were so, it would account for the disconnected way in which it appears—just like a number of fragments naturally would. ”

“ Yes, ” said her elder sister ; “ and would not that also account for the similarity of some of the events, as, for instance, Abraham’s deceit in trying to pass off his wife as his sister ? Surely such a good man would not have done the same wrong thing twice under almost exactly the same circumstances (comp. Gen.

xii. 10-20 with xx.). It seems much more likely that both stories arose from the same event."

"I think so too," answered Aunt Amy. "One can understand Abraham's making use of a subterfuge to attain his purpose just for once; but we can hardly imagine his doing so a second time, after he had once realized that his conduct had been wrong."

"Yes, that would be strange indeed," said Mary. "And he, who was so good too! Was it not generous of him to give his nephew the choice of the land when they came into Canaan?"

"Yes, Mary. I am glad you noticed that; for it shows us, perhaps better than any other passage, not only his generosity, but his wisdom. He found that it would not do to have two masters in one camp; so, to avoid dissensions, he suggested to his nephew Lot that they should separate. Now, being the elder, he had the right to choose first. Remember, too, that it was not a choice between two places nearly equal in value. The region round about Sodom was very fruitful; and therefore, in giving Lot the choice, he practically decided the question; for Lot naturally selected the best spot. The tribes then separated, and Lot settled in the fertile valleys of the Jordan, while Abraham made his way to the more barren country of Western Palestine, and pitched his tent under a spreading oak in the plain of Mamre, in Hebron."

"Did Abraham remain here for the rest of his life?" asked Cara.

"He seems to have made it his home, and kept it as such until his death," answered Aunt Amy, "although we hear of his journeying about at times. Here, too, it

was that he bought the cave of Macpelah, when his wife Sarah died, as a burial-place for his people."

"Oh yes, auntie! I remember reading about that," said Cara; "some one wanted to give it to him; and he would not accept it as a gift, but insisted on paying the full value of it."

"Yes. Ephron the Hittite, who owned the field, was very anxious to give it to him; but Abraham persisted in buying it. Why do you think he acted in this manner?"

"Was it because he was too proud?" asked Cara.

"I think not," replied Aunt Amy; "try again."

"Perhaps," said Mary, "he thought it would be paying a disrespect to the memory of his wife to put her grave in a place that he had not made his own in some real way. I don't know if you understand what I mean, auntie; but, just as we do not like to give a present to any one we love that has cost us nothing—I don't mean only in money, but in time, trouble, or self-denial—well! so he would like to buy for himself the burial-ground for his people, and not simply give them what had only been received as a gift from some one else."

"I like that explanation, Mary; and I think it is very likely to be the true one. If it be so, the feeling that prompted Abraham to refuse it as a gift was good, and we must strive to emulate it. In our religious thought, for instance, if it is to be of value to ourselves and to others, we must not accept it from the hands of some one else, we must buy it fairly for ourselves by devoting time and labour to the work. By so doing we shall learn to make our lives pure and holy, and thus

offer to God the only sacrifice which he desires of us."

"Does the cave of Macpelah still exist?" asked Ernest.

"Yes! it has lasted through all these years; and some time since I read a very graphic description of it, written by Dean Stanley just after he had been there. It is very jealously guarded by the Mussulmen, who hold it in great veneration; for you know that they trace their descent from Abraham, as well as the Jews."

"Do they, auntie?" said Cara; "how can they do that?"

"They are the descendents of Ishmael, the elder son of Abraham, born to him by Hagar."

"Do you know any more anecdotes about Abraham?" asked Cara.

"I have one here in Dean Stanley's History, that he has extracted from a 'Jew's book.' It is so pretty that I will read it to you.

"When Abraham sat at his tent-door, according to his custom, waiting to entertain strangers, he espied an old man stooping and leaning on his staff, weary with age and travel, coming towards him, who was nearly a hundred years of age. He received him kindly, washed his feet, provided supper, and caused him to sit down, but, observing that the old man ate and prayed not, nor begged a blessing on his meat, asked him why he did not worship the God of Heaven. The old man told him that he worshipped the fire only; at which answer Abraham grew so zealously angry, that he thrust the old man out of his tent, and exposed him to all the evils of the night and an unguarded position. When the old man

was gone, God called to Abraham and asked him where the stranger was. He replied, "I thrust him away because he did not worship Thee." God answered him, "I have suffered him these hundred years although he dishonoured me; and couldst not thou endure him one night when he gave thee no trouble?" Upon this, saith the story, Abraham fetched him back again and gave him hospitable entertainment and wise instruction. Go thou and do likewise, and thy charity will be rewarded by the God of Heaven.' "

"I think," said Aunt Pollie, when her sister had finished the story, "that the sentiment of this legend equals any to be found in our Bible. What a lesson of tolerance and love it teaches us! Its last exhortation, 'Go thou and do likewise!' should surely incite us to do all the good we can to any who need our help, without first waiting to see whether they belong to the same family, nation, or creed as ourselves."

"We cannot do better, I think," continued Aunt Amy, "than to let this anecdote close our afternoon's chat; and we will reserve the rest of Abraham's history until our next meeting. Then I propose to speak about the intended sacrifice of Isaac by his father—a subject that has created so much discussion, and, to me, seems so often to be misunderstood."

SIXTH SUNDAY.

ABRAHAM (*continued*).

"I AM so glad, auntie, that we are to talk about the sacrifice of Isaac to-day," said Cara; "for it has often puzzled me, and I have wondered whether you believe the story to be true or not."

"Well," answered Aunt Amy, "let us consider it, and see to what conclusion we shall come. Mary, will you read the account of it to us, so as to refresh our memories?"

Mary found the place in Gen. xxii. and read as she was desired, ending at the 19th verse.

"Thank you!" said her aunt; "and now let us see what truth and beauty we may gather from this story. In the first place, are we to accept it as absolute truth?"

"I don't know at all," answered May, looking perplexed. "Mr. Goodman used to tell us that it was true; but then he said the same of all the Bible."

"Let us think, then, for a moment what the acceptance of it as absolute truth will involve. How does it represent our God here? what is He said to command?"

"Why, auntie, he commands Abraham to sacrifice his favourite son, and thus show how entirely he loved the God he worshipped."

"But was it not cruel to order a father to kill his son?"

"It would have been," answered May, "if God had allowed Abraham to do it; but as soon as he was found

willing to make the sacrifice, an angel was sent to stay his hand."

"But," Aunt Pollie here broke in, "if it be a wicked thing to kill one's child, God would surely not have commanded or tempted any one to do it; for does not St. James speak truly when he declares that 'God cannot be tempted of evil, neither tempteth He any man'?"

"Ah! but you know," said May, "it was only to test Abraham's faith, and see if he loved God better than his son."

"Then do you think, May, that our God needeth to test us in this way? Does He not know our hearts and souls even more truly than we know them ourselves? If we think that He is obliged to find out such things in this way, we cannot believe that He knoweth all things."

"Oh! auntie, I did not mean to say that at all."

"No, dear, I daresay not," answered Aunt Amy. "But do you not see that if you accept this story as true, your ideas of God must be limited. Can you tell me why so many do believe it to be a true statement of what really happened?"

May thought a moment, and then said, "Because they read it in the Bible; and surely, auntie, those who wrote it would not have put in any thing they knew to be untrue."

"Certainly not, May; but let me ask you another question. Have you heard of the cruel practices among the Hindoos, of how people kill their little children, and even themselves, because they believe that their Gods commanded them to do so?"

"Yes, indeed. Is it not dreadful to read about such unnatural cruelty, and to think, too, that the poor people believe that it pleases their God!"

"But it proves that they are in earnest in their worship; does it not? It must need a great faith in their religion to incite them to give to the Gods those nearest and dearest to them."

"It must, of course; but still it is awful to think that they can believe this!"

"Undoubtedly. But suppose one of them were to write an account of such a ceremony, would they not declare that their God ordered the sacrifices?"

"I suppose they would. But surely you would not liken them to the writers in the Bible."

"I don't know about that; but I merely wanted to show you that honest and true people may imagine that God ordered them to do something that we feel sure that he is too good and just to do."

"Well, auntie, I see that you do not think this story is absolutely true; but will you tell me why you do not think so?"

"Willingly, dear. The idea with which I start is just this: our God and Creator is good, just, and loving. We may find proofs of this in the manifold works of nature and mankind; and therefore I cannot believe Him to do any thing contrary to these characteristics. But if I am to accept this story as absolutely true, I must admit two things:—first, that He could tempt Abraham to commit a murder—that He who implanted in the father's breast the divine spark of paternal love, would order it to be stifled and crushed; and, second, that He cannot be omniscient, for he was obliged to have recourse

to such means as we read of here to prove whether Abraham loved Him or not. Therefore, because I believe that our God has a perfect nature, I cannot accept this statement to be really true."

"Then," asked May, "will you please tell us how you think such an account came to exist? for I suppose you believe it had some foundation."

"Of course I do. Let us see what explanation we can find without charging God with being imperfect or the writers with being false. It seems to me that there is another way that is quite a natural one, and which we may accept without forcing a strained meaning on the words.

"We know that although Abraham and his tribe worshipped but one God, yet he lived among nations who bowed down to several, and who often sacrificed themselves or their children to win some favour. Now, may we not easily understand how Abraham may have been taunted by those tribes with the selfishness of his religion, that allowed him to receive the good things of this life, without giving any return, so as to secure further favours? But we need not even go so far as to suppose that the taunts of others assailed him; for in his thoughtful heart, full of gratitude to his God, there would naturally arise such thoughts as these:—'If those around me, although not having such a pure conception of their Maker as I have, can yet give up those nearest and dearest to them in sacrifice, surely I, to whom so many blessings have been given, should do something to show that I too am in earnest.' And then, looking at his son Isaac, would he not think that there, in his darling child, was a sacrifice meet for his God? And so he takes the

boy, fancying that God commanded him so to do, and journeys with him into the land of Moriah, and there, on a mount, prepares the altar for the sacrifice. His son asks presently, 'Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?' and Abraham makes answer, 'The Lord will provide.' But now the fatal moment approaches, and the father is at last obliged to avow his purpose to the boy and bid him prepare. Isaac is bound and the knife is ready to slay him. But the father's heart, that has rebelled all along at the unnatural deed, now asserts itself, and Abraham hears a still small voice within him whisper, 'Can it be possible that thy God, who hath filled thy heart with paternal love, can He command thee to do this deed? Unbind the boy; and though thy love must be great indeed that it could have tempted thee to offer him to thy God, yet know that He desireth not the death of any of His people!' And Abraham gladly obeyed the voice and loosed his son. Then, having offered a ram as a sacrifice instead, he returned home once more."

"Then you think the angel mentioned here was in reality only his conscience," said May.

"Yes, I think the people of olden times often thought so, and indeed fitly regarded that inward monitor as the guardian angel that God has sent to accompany us on life's journey to strengthen, console, and help us. And I, for one, will not quarrel with such an idea; for I think it is very beautiful, and contains much poetry and truth in it," answered her aunt.

"But still," said Mary, "it was very good of Abraham to wish to give the best he had to God; and I like him all the better that he did not really kill his son."

"I quite agree with you," returned Aunt Amy. "It shows an intense love of God in the first place; and, secondly, it teaches us that Abraham had strength of mind to judge for himself, and to resist after all the evil influences of the time; for he allowed his conscience to control his actions, rather than the voices of the outward world.

"Yes," added Aunt Pollie. "Viewed in this way we find the story very beautiful and full of instruction. I think the mistake Abraham made was this: while feeling that the best thing he possessed should be devoted to his God, he did not consider that the life of his son was not his to give. He had not heard the Psalmist exclaim, 'The sacrifices of God are a broken heart, a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise,' nor the warnings of Isaiah when he says, 'To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me, saith the Lord; I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he goats. . . . Wash you, and make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; learn to do well.' (Isaiah, i. 11-17.)"

"And now," continued Aunt Amy, "having thus glanced at the history of Abraham, I think we will next Sunday pass on to that of Moses, and see what we have to say about him."

"But are we not going to take the story of Esau and Jacob and that of Joseph first?" asked Cara.

"I think not, dear," returned her aunt; "for it is not our purpose now to go through the Bible, but only, as I said before, to speak of one or two portions so that you may thoroughly understand what we believe to be the spirit of its teaching."

"But I do want to ask you one question about Esau and Jacob," said Cara. "Jacob is always supposed to have been God's favourite, and yet Esau seems to have had by far the better disposition; why is that?"

"Well, I will tell you how I think this idea arose," returned her aunt. "Their history was written long after they had both passed away; and people saw that the seed of Esau, the elder brother, was much less powerful than that of Jacob; therefore they considered that the latter must have been the favourite of God; for in those days it was believed that prosperity and adversity were simply signs by which He marked His approval or displeasure. In reality we may easily see from their early history how they obtained their different positions. The far-seeing, clever, and crafty Jacob would much more easily become a powerful leader, than the careless, free-hearted Esau, who preferred his mess of pottage to the honour and glory of his birthright."

"Thank you, auntie; I think I understand your meaning. I have oftener wondered at Mr. Goodman when he praised Jacob so much: even when he was guilty of deceiving his father at the last, we were told that it was not wrong, because God had willed him to do it."

"Ah! there is the evil of accepting every word of the Bible as true. By doing so we drag our God down to a miserably low level; and then, as a natural consequence, our notions of morality become vague and confused. Let us believe nothing of our God that we hold to be wrong in ourselves; and when we find things written about Him that are so, let us, in all reverence and sincerity, consider that the writers were simply saying what they thought about God, and not that He really did all the things

recorded of Him. In this way, we shall be able to draw much beauty and instruction from these ancient writings ; and at the same time our highest ideal of God will not be contracted or confined by believing implicitly what was written of Him so many centuries ago, while nations were yet in their infancy."

SEVENTH SUNDAY.

MOSES.

"AUNTIE, I have something to tell you," said Ernest, when they were next assembled. "You know you told us some Sundays ago that we were to ask our orthodox friends why they believed the Bible to be literally the word of God; so that, some time hence, we might consider their reasons, and see whether we could accept them."

"Yes, I remember saying so very well," answered Aunt Amy.

"Well, one of my friends has given me a book all about it; it contains five lectures that the Bishop of Lincoln preached at Westminster Abbey; and it goes so fully into the matter that I thought it would be the very thing for us."

"I think it will," said his aunt: "I have read the book myself; and as it is the work of a bishop, it may be taken as a fair representative of those opinions. Suppose, then, that next Sunday we discuss this book, together with any other reasons that you may have heard in support of the doctrine of the divine inspiration of the Bible. I shall look to you, Ernest, to read the book through carefully, so as to be able to give us its salient points."

"Oh! yes; I will gladly do that," replied Ernest.

"And now," Aunt Amy went on, "let us begin our subject for to-day. I am afraid time will not allow us to go very fully into the history of Moses in one

afternoon; but we will do what we can, and you must not mind if our chat be somewhat longer than usual."

"We shall like that all the better," exclaimed Cara.

"Indeed, we shall," added Mary. "But, auntie, is there not a wide gap in the history of the Hebrews, between the death of Joseph and the birth of Moses?"

"Yes. It is not known exactly how long a period elapsed between those two events; but it must have been several generations, because we find the position that the Hebrews held in the land was very different at those two stages of their history."

"Yes, it was!" said Mary. "In the time of Joseph they were great people in the land, whereas when the other Pharaoh reigned they had become the slaves of the Egyptians."

"Just so," returned Aunt Amy. "They had gradually sunk into heavy bondage, and at the time at which Exodus commences they were groaning under heavy burdens. Most laborious tasks were forced upon them, and many of the splendid buildings for which Egypt has been rendered famous, were built by this oppressed people."

"And the wicked Pharaoh was not content with overworking them, but he ordered all the baby boys to be put to death," said Cara indignantly. "He was afraid that they might become powerful and be revenged on him, I suppose. But Moses did live in spite of his cruelty!"

"And lived to some purpose too, as we shall see presently. May, will you read us the story of Moses being hidden in the bulrushes?"

May turned to Exodus ii. and read the first ten

verses. "I wonder why his mother chose the river to hide the baby in," said she, when she had finished.

"It may have been in this way," replied her aunt. "She probably knew that the princess was in the habit of bathing there, and hoped that it might thus attract her attention. Again, you know that the Nile was considered a sacred river by the Egyptians, and living among them as the Hebrews did, they naturally imbibed many of their ideas. Jochebed evidently felt secure that her little one would receive no harm from the sacred river. The papyrus reed too, of which she most likely made the basket or boat, was supposed by the Egyptians to be a protection against crocodiles. So, having done her best in every way that she knew to secure the safety of her child, she sent her daughter Miriam to watch the progress of events."

"And then the princess had him taken from the water and brought up as her own son," said May. "What a different position for him to that of his fellow countrymen!"

"It was, indeed. But though raised to this high estate, and taught all that was known in those days, so that he became wiser than the magicians and wonder-workers of the court, yet he never seems to have forgotten the race from which he sprung, and did not identify himself at all with the nation of his adopted mother."

"I suppose," said Cara, "that his own mother, who nursed him, often used to tell him about his countrymen; so that he must have been interested in their welfare from babyhood almost."

"Very likely. At any rate he always warmly es-

poused their cause; and indeed this led to his being obliged to flee from the country. For when Moses was out one day, he noticed an Egyptian smiting a Hebrew. His keen sense of justice (which was one of Moses's chief characteristics, and which always led him to defend the weak against the strong) could not brook such conduct, and he therefore took the Hebrew's part and slew the oppressor, afterwards burying him in the sand. Now there being no one else near, Moses naturally thought that he was safe from detection; but danger came from the quarter where he least expected it. The man whose part he had taken was the next day quarrelling with another Hebrew. Moses, coming up to them, asked reproachfully why they strove together; upon which the man, turning round, said, 'Who made thee a prince and a judge over us? Intendest thou to kill me, as thou killedst the Egyptian yesterday?' Then Moses feared lest Pharaoh should hear what he had done, and so he fled."

"It was very good of Moses to take the Hebrew's part," said May, "but was it right of him to kill the Egyptian?"

"Perhaps that was going too far; but you must remember that in those days life was not held to be so sacred as it is now, and Moses may have known that if the oppressor were not killed, the poor slave would have lost his life."

"Well! anyhow," said Ernest, "it was a shabby thing for the Hebrew to cast it up against him."

"Certainly it was," replied his aunt. "But do you not know that slavery oppresses the mind as much as it does the body, and that gradually it grinds down the soul

until it becomes low and grovelling. We notice that it is so wherever slavery exists ; and this was the greatest difficulty, perhaps, which Moses had to encounter."

"Where did he go, when he left Egypt?" asked Cara."

"To the land of Midian, where he again distinguished himself as a champion of the weak. While resting at a well, some young girls came to draw water for their flocks ; but some shepherds interfered and would have driven them away, when Moses defended them and then helped them in their work."

"I remember now," said Cara ; "and then he went home to their father Jethro's house, and lived there some time, did he not?"

"Yes, Jethro was so pleased with his conduct that he invited him to stay. Moses married Zipporah, one of the daughters. This stay in Midian must have been of great use to him ; for Jethro was a priest and wise ruler in the land, so that Moses could gain much from intercourse with him."

"Was it not here," said Mary, "that God is said to have appeared in a burning bush?"

"It was ; and this brings us to one of the important points of Moses's history.

"Although no longer in the land with his countrymen, Moses's thoughts were constantly employed in trying to work out a scheme for their deliverance. The long days' watch on the mountains, over the flocks of his father-in-law, allowed ample time for these reflections ; and it was while thus engaged that the bush is supposed to have given evidence of the presence of the Almighty."

"Did He really appear to Moses?" asked May.

"I do not think so. To me this story seems to present the same difficulties against such a belief as does that of Abraham's sacrifice. How can we understand the passage of His 'coming down' in the 8th verse of this 3rd chapter? The idea of God is here quite below Christ's teaching about Him; and the Great Spirit from whom we derive our being, and who governeth the whole universe, is made to appear only as a powerful man, controlled by human passions."

"I suppose you are now alluding to the last two verses, where he is said to have commanded the Hebrews to steal the jewels from the Egyptians. That does seem a strange command truly!" said Mary.

"It does, indeed. But if we do not accept this as literally true, what answer shall we give to the question—How did the story arise, if it be not true? Here I think we shall be helped by Josephus, that learned Jewish historian who wrote an account of the Jewish history for the benefit of the Greeks."

"I have heard of him," said Ernest; "but I did not know who he really was. When did he live?"

"He was born about five years after the death of Christ. His Jewish history is very interesting, as he explains many things that appear strange in the Bible narrative. Concerning the burning bush Josephus says that Moses took his flock to a mountain called Sinai. He goes on, 'Now this is the highest of all the mountains thereabout and the best for pasturage, the herbage being there good; and it had not been before fed upon, because of the opinion men had that God dwelt there, the shepherds not daring to ascend up to it.' He then describes the interview between God and Moses, in some-

what the same manner as we find it in our Bible. You may notice too, in Ex. iii. 1, the mountain is spoken of as 'the mountain of God.'"

"But it is Mount Horeb there, not Mount Sinai," said Ernest.

"Some think they are only different names for the same place, others that Horeb is the name of the range of mountains of which Mount Sinai is one," returned Aunt Amy. "Here, then, I think is partly a reason why Moses may have imagined the vision here recorded."

"Mr. Goodman used to tell us," said May, "that the Bible was either all true, or else it must be a book of falsehood altogether."

"Many say so; but I do not agree with them. We think that we should use our reason with this book as with all others. Let us then consider how we treat other histories. Do we believe that the history of King Alfred is all false, because we may not accept as literal truth the pretty story of his burning the cakes? Do we think that the life of the great reformer Luther was a myth, because we reject the legend of his encounter with the devil in the lonely castle of the Wartburg? Can we not appreciate the courage of Joan of Arc, and honour her for her patriotism, even though we cannot believe that the visions she described were any thing more than the workings of a highly sensitive mind?

"And may we not accept the writings of the Old Testament in the same way? People of past ages have ever loved to surround every important event with a halo of mystery and legend. Let us try to grasp the spirit of

the writings, and while admiring the beauty of their poetical traditions, accept as absolute truth nothing against which the higher instincts of our nature revolt."

"I like the comparison of Moses with Joan of Arc very much," said Ernest; "there was a great similarity between them. Both deeply concerned with their nation's troubles, both meditating their best mode of deliverance while keeping watch upon the mountain-top, and both believing that they had seen a vision commanding them to go forth to serve their people."

"And," here put in Cara, "in both cases those they served were ungrateful and murmured against them. How true-hearted and brave was Joan of Arc! Of course her thinking that she had had the vision does not make her history any the less real!"

"Certainly it does not," returned Aunt Amy. "It would have been simply unnatural had she not had any of these ideas in the times in which she lived.

"And so it was with Moses. He firmly believed that he was the chosen of God to release his people from a foreign yoke; and can we wonder that, while alone on that 'mountain of God,' he mistook the promptings of his own soul for the direct voice of God?"

"Being now determined to attempt the rescue of his fellow countrymen, he takes farewell of Jethro, and with his wife and sons he returns to Egypt. Then he meets his brother Aaron, who accompanies him to Pharaoh's court. Arrived there, he prays the king to grant three days' leave of absence to the Hebrews, so that they may go into the desert to offer sacrifice to their God. But Pharaoh sees in this only a subterfuge to enable them to escape, and therefore he refuses their request. Then

Moses and Aaron work wonders before him, greater even than those wrought by the magicians, so as to terrify the king into giving his consent."

"And then the plagues were sent," said May, "were they not?"

"Some great disasters happened at this time, which were supposed to be sent for Pharaoh's punishment. You know that then, and indeed up to a much later period, events were supposed to be direct rewards or punishments for the action of the people. Hence it was that when a misfortune occurred, every one tried to discover some crime that had been committed; and as unfortunately evil is so continually at hand, they could easily trace the unhappiness to some special cause."

"Does not Christ allude to this as a mistaken idea, when he speaks of the falling of the tower of Siloam?" asked Mary.

"Yes; and people, even in our own time, constantly need reminding of His teaching on that point, so liable are we all to trace accidents to the wrong source."

"Just as when the 'London' ship went down, so many said it was a judgment because it contained some actors," added Mary.

"You see, then, if we are still apt to fall into this error," Aunt Amy went on, "we cannot wonder at people doing so in earlier times.

"However, the plagues followed each other very closely; and then a fearful pestilence broke out which carried off many of the Egyptians; and after this Pharaoh became so terrified that he reluctantly gave his consent to let the people go."

"But it does seem strange that so many plagues should follow one another," said May.

"It does ; but most likely many of them were induced by the same cause. And you must bear in mind, too, that the account of them was written long after the event ; so that they may have been somewhat magnified. At any rate we can scarcely understand their being a miraculous occurrence, or surely Pharaoh would not have hesitated so long before giving the required permission ; nor when he had given it, would he have forgotten the horrible catastrophes that had induced him to consent, so far as to rush after them to try to bring them back again."

"I suppose Moses was quite prepared for the journey when the permission was given," said Ernest.

"Yes, he had matured all his plans, and now gave the order to depart. The Hebrews borrowed (or, rather, stole) jewels from the Egyptians ; and in the dead of the night, after partaking of a hasty meal, they departed. Since then this supper has been yearly celebrated to commemorate their deliverance from the land of bondage ; and Dean Stanley tells us that he was present at one of these ceremonies—in Samaria, I think it was. The lamb without blemish, that was to be roasted whole—the bread made hastily, without leaven—the people eating hurriedly, with their loins girded as if ready for a journey—are all reproduced according to the accounts given in Ex. xii. 1-28."

"How pleased the poor Hebrews must have been to escape from Egypt," exclaimed May.

"One would have thought so," replied Aunt Amy ; "but Moses had indeed set himself no easy task. Doubt-

less he thought that having now attained their liberty, the people would be happy; but the 400 years of slavery had degraded their very being, and liberty was not to them the priceless boon that free-born souls acknowledge it to be. They were ever ready to murmur against Moses at the slightest hardship; and the many difficulties that beset them in their wanderings were met in a cowardly and discontented spirit. How galling must this have been to Moses! He, who had devoted his life to their service—he, whose generous heart made him refuse the good things of this world while his fellow countrymen were in bondage—how much must he have lamented over the degraded state of his people!

“It needed all the hopefulness and courage that his noble nature contained to enable him to pursue his task amid so much discouragement. But he was equal to it; and right manfully he set himself to conquer all obstacles. He saw that it was useless to attempt to lead the Israelites at once into Canaan; for their spirit was crushed and they had lost all love of enterprise. Therefore he determined to let them remain in the wilderness until another generation had grown up, whom he could educate to nobler aspirations.”

“You have not mentioned any thing of the crossing the Red Sea, auntie,” said Cara. “How do you think that was done?”

“I do not know. Some think that the Hebrews discovered a ford, which the Egyptians tried to take also, but missing it, were drowned. Again, some travellers tell us that in this sea, at rare intervals, when certain winds are stirring, the waters are literally blown

back, and during the time the wind continues a passage across might be effected. If this statement be correct, it affords a very good solution to the mystery."

"That is curious," exclaimed Ernest. "It must be a strange sight."

"It must, indeed," added Mary. "But, auntie, you have scarcely mentioned the wanderings of the Israelites, nor a number of other events, and our afternoon is almost at an end."

"I see it is," replied Aunt Amy, looking at her watch; "we must leave off presently. You must read more about these things for yourselves; but to what I wanted to call your attention more especially this afternoon was the life and character of Moses. I do admire him so much! Longfellow says, in one of his poems,

'Whene'er a noble deed is wrought,
Whene'er is spoken a noble thought,
Our hearts, in glad surprise,
To higher levels rise.'

"And so it is. We feel that human nature is raised by good and true souls. We may not have to lead a nation as Moses did; but there are some moments in the lives of each one of us, when disappointments and difficulties choke up our path, and we feel inclined to give way to despair. Then it is that the remembrance of difficulties nobly overcome, and of brave deeds bravely done, stimulate us once more to action; and we too remember that

'We may make our lives sublime,
And departing, leave behind us
Footprints on the sands of Time.'

"I think," said May, "that I admire him most for his self-forgetfulness. He always acknowledged himself to be only an instrument of the Almighty, and he never claimed rewards or honours for himself."

"That is very true," returned her aunt. "And one more important lesson his life should teach us—*faith in our work*. That alone could have given him spirit to overcome his many difficulties; and although the discontent and faint-heartedness of the people caused him to delay his entrance into Canaan, so that death claimed him before he had seen the fulfilment of his dearest hopes, yet he felt convinced that the end—if good—would be achieved, although his eyes might not behold it; and in that strong faith and trust in God he passed away."

EIGHTH SUNDAY.

ARGUMENTS, IN FAVOUR OF ACCEPTING THE BIBLE AS GOD'S WRITTEN WORD, EXAMINED.

"I AM very glad to see you all present this afternoon, for our subject is, I think, a most important one," said Aunt Amy, as she looked round on the group of happy eager faces. "You all seem to be fully interested in the subject; and I trust that to-day's chat may give us plenty of food for future thought. So much depends upon the turning of the scale here, that we must be careful to hold the balance as justly as we can, and to be in no hurry to form our conclusions.

"You, Ernest, have promised to give us Bishop Wordsworth's ideas on the subject; and we will do our best to weigh them fairly and calmly, to the end that we may 'prove all things, and hold fast to that which is true.' And now, what is the first point that strikes you in these lectures?"

"The very first sentence, auntie. The Bishop declares that on the Bible, and the Bible alone, rests our Christian faith, and that unless we believe in the divinity of that book we cannot obtain salvation."

"That is a strong statement certainly," replied Aunt Amy; "and I do not wonder at your being struck with it. He infers, then, that none of God's creatures, except Christians (whom Max Müller tells us are computed at 30 per cent. of the whole world), can possibly be saved; and of these we must at least allow that one quarter do not believe the required doctrine. Therefore, according

to this assertion, not more than one fourth of the whole population can expect to be saved from eternal perdition."

"What a strange idea one must have of God to believe such a thing!" said Aunt Pollie. "Either we must imagine that the Almighty has not the power to save us from such misery, or that He is cruel and unjust enough to create so many people only to wreak His vengeance upon them. Such a belief would require very strong testimony indeed to make me accept it; it is such an awful doctrine."

"The Bishop then tells us," continued Ernest, "that we must not accept the Bible as in part inspired by God, while in other portions we find errors and imperfections. He says, 'We do not admit that the Bible is blemished with errors. We know that an unbeliever may justly challenge the theologians who make such an admission as that, and say "A book cannot be said to be inspired, or to carry with it the authority of being God's word, if only portions come from Him, and there exists no plain and infallible sign to indicate which those portions are, and if the same writer may give us in a verse in the Bible a revelation of the Most High, and in the next verse a blunder of his own. What can be the meaning or nature of an Inspiration to teach Truth, if it does not guarantee its recipient from teaching error?" In answer to such questions as these, we affirm that the Bible is the Word of God, and that it is not marred by human infirmities.'"

"I am afraid," here remarked Aunt Amy, "that to affirm such a thing we must shut out common sense altogether; for even supporters of the doctrine of inspi-

ration usually allow that it was the substance of what men wrote, and not the words, that was inspired by God. However, I must admit that if the Bishop could prove his words, it is the more likely supposition of the two ; but a very slight reference to the Bible itself will serve, I think, to show that it certainly contains some errors. But we will leave that just now and pass on to his next statement."

"Well, auntie, he proceeds to tell us that we ought to have a good reason for accepting these writings as divine. If we can only say that we *feel* they are inspired, that is not enough ; for unbelievers may reply that they do not feel that such is the case ; and, he continues, no one can affirm that if the sacred books were mingled with others and placed before an impartial witness, who *only judged from the contents*, he would be able to discriminate which were of God and which of men."

"That is very true, I think," commented Aunt Amy ; "but surely that is a strong proof against his theory. That God's word should be so little different from man's that it cannot be distinguished therefrom, seems difficult of belief."

"Then, auntie, after saying a great deal about the harm that this appeal to the feelings has brought about, even in the case of such teachers as Luther and others, he tells us that he is led to accept this doctrine on the testimony of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost."

"Ah ! now we come to the point. First, what does he mean by the testimony of God the Father ?"

"He explains it by saying that the testimony of God

is shown here more especially by the usages of the ancient Jewish people, and also by the works of Josephus their historian, who speaks of the Old Testament as 'the oracles of God.'"

"Let us consider this proposition a moment," interposed Aunt Amy. "We know that the Jews set great store on these Scriptures, and kept them in their holiest place; but this does not necessarily imply that they accepted them as divine in the same way as does the Bishop. Writing was very uncommon in those days; and it was only natural that these earliest records of the nation should be guarded with jealous care. But let us see what light Josephus can throw on the matter. If Josephus had believed that every statement in them was divine (as the Bishop avers), we should have in his History of the Jews an exact repetition of the Old Testament narrative. But we find that the accounts often differ in detail, that some parts of our Biblical histories are omitted; in other places we have records of events not mentioned in the Bible; and often where in the latter we find speeches of a few words only, in Josephus they are elaborated at great length. And yet in his preface he says, 'I shall accurately describe what is contained in our records . . . and this without adding any thing to what is therein contained, or taking away any thing therefrom.' He also tells us (and this will account for the additions) that the Jews possessed other books besides those collected by Ptolemy of Egypt. 'Those who were sent to Alexandria gave him (Ptolemy) only the books of the law, while there were a vast number of other matters in our *sacred* books.' It was from some of these, I suppose,

that this Jewish historian derives those parts that we do not find in our Bible—some anecdotes of Moses, the account of his commanding the Egyptians in the war against Ethiopia, &c. &c.; but it is plain that he sets as much value on these parts as on the rest. But yet Christendom does not acknowledge these to be ‘sacred books’ in the same sense as the Bible; therefore it is surely scarcely fair to accept some things on the testimony of Josephus, while other parts are ignored or explained away. I shall have more to say about this learned Jew later on; but for the present I will leave it with a protest against the assertion that the testimony of Josephus and the Jewish Church is, in any special sense, that of our God and Father.”

“We now,” resumed Ernest, “come to the second proof—that contained in Christ’s life and teaching. It is on this that the Bishop lays the most stress. He declares that Christ believed the Old Testament to be divine, and that therefore his followers must do the same. Again, he notices that Christ seems to refer more especially to the Pentateuch, as if to nullify the doubts cast upon it by scholars in our time; for he defeats the tempter in the wilderness by simply repeating a verse from its pages, while in another place he declares ‘and it were easier for heaven and earth to pass, than for one jot or tittle of the law to fail.’”

“Stop a moment,” said Aunt Amy. “Does the Bishop mean here by the law the Pentateuch?”

“Yes, auntie; he distinctly says so.”

“Very well. Will you, Mary, turn to Luke xvi. and read the 18th verse—the one that immediately follows that just quoted?”

Mary read, “Whosoever putteth away his wife and

marrieth another, committeth adultery ; and whosoever marrieth her that is put away from her husband committeth adultery."

"And what is this but a distinct alteration of the law of Moses in Deut. xxiv. 1, 2, which allows a second marriage if a bill of divorcement be given. But it is not only here that you will find Christ setting aside or altering these ancient laws, as, for example, in the Sermon on the Mount (Math. v.). Now, if he had accepted the writings of the Old Testament as divine and infallible, he surely would not have interfered with them, or, at least, not with so little ceremony. No ! I do not believe that he thought of them as being perfect ; but, as a Jew, he held them justly in great reverence, as containing the historical records of his nation and as being the work of great men. These books, too, were so constantly read aloud in the synagogues, that his quoting them so frequently was only natural, and seems to me to be no more a proof of his regarding them as *the* truth, pure and simple, than that Shakespeare wrote absolute truth because his writings abound in such glorious sayings, so that great and good men constantly quote them."

"Then, auntie, we come to the third argument. The testimony of the Holy Ghost, as seen in the teachings of the Church."

"Is that the testimony of the Holy Ghost?" asked Cara. "I have been wondering what that meant. But why should the testimony of the Jewish Church and Josephus be called that of God, while the teaching of the Christian Church is ascribed to the Holy Ghost? I should have thought they were both due to the same influence."

"I believe they were, too," returned her aunt. "But

many people say that the Holy Ghost was not sent to earth until the day of Pentecost, after Christ's death, to replace him in the world, and that therefore he could not have inspired the Church before then. We, however, who think that the Holy Ghost simply means the spirit of God (that religious spirit that dwells in every human heart), shall naturally consider that it was its influence that animated, not only the Jewish and Christian Churches, but also every other community that has sought after the living God, and endeavoured to live up to the highest standard that they could conceive."

"The testimony of the Church, then," continued Ernest, "is in favour of divine inspiration. Would men, the Bishop asks, have been willing to suffer in the cause of error as they have done in the cause of truth? Would the doctrines have spread in Rome in the face of so much persecution? Would these have been productive of the civilization that has been brought about, if the teaching were all mistaken?"

"As to suffering in the cause of error, that we know is no uncommon thing; for a slight acquaintance with history will teach us how, again and again, brave men and women have lived and died martyrs to what they believed to be true, although we think that they were often mistaken. Martyrdom shows a sincere earnestness of conviction, but not necessarily of truth. And as to the statement that a doctrine is proved true by its enduring in spite of persecution, all history shows that opposition usually defeats its own object, and that persecution only kindles the flame that it tries to extinguish."

"But you do acknowledge that Christianity has

done great service to the world, do you not?" asked May.

"Assuredly I do. The spirit of Christ's teaching has been intensely valuable to mankind, and is of such intrinsic worth that there is no need to prop it up by such weak supports; and I firmly believe that it will remain to bless the world long after the infallibility of the Bible has become a bygone notion of the past."

"But, auntie, the Bishop brings forward many other arguments in favour of its divine origin. First the plea of antiquity; then the fulfilment of the prophecies; and, again, he points to the unison of teaching that exists throughout. He concludes by saying:—'The Bible, and the Bible alone, makes subjects loyal to their sovereigns—makes sovereigns rule rightly—judges and magistrates judge justly—masters kind to their servants—servants faithful to their masters—busy men and women alleviate sickness and visit prisons. The Bible, and the Bible alone, operates on the heart, &c., &c. These are the fruits of the Bible.'"

"I think," said Aunt Amy, when Ernest had finished this extract, "it is hardly fair to other religious creeds to make such a statement as that. I fear, too, that in Christian countries men are not always found loyal to their sovereigns or faithful to their masters, that ingratitude, tyranny, and selfishness are not extinct among us. At the same time we do hear of many cases of faithful service, self-denying love, and tender devotion in regions where the Bible is unknown."

"That these are the true aims of all true religion, I freely grant; but surely the same God who endowed those of old with the Holy Spirit of Love and Wisdom

has not confined His inspiration to them, but has showered it broadcast over the world, so that all may partake of its glories. It reminds me of an anecdote quoted by Canon Liddon, which runs thus:—‘A Bedouin was once asked how he knew that there was a God. “In the same way,” replied he, “that I know, by looking at the sand, when a man or beast has crossed the desert—by His footprints in the world around me.”’ And he was surely right! all nature emits sparks of the divine light, and, above all, in the lives of great and good souls we ever find traces of our divine origin. And wherever we find these footprints, as we often do in the Bible and elsewhere, we acknowledge our allegiance to them and admire and reverence their teaching.”

“We have been so much interested in our talk that we have quite forgotten the time,” here Aunt Pollie broke in.

“Never mind that, please,” exclaimed one or two voices; “do let us finish our subject.”

“As you wish,” replied Aunt Amy; “but I hope you will not be too tired to think about what we are saying. We come now to the argument that the truth of the Bible is proved by the fulfilment of prophecy. This is a weighty one indeed, if it bear examination; but, for my own part, I cannot think it does.

“I think we shall find that the prophecies may be divided into four divisions:—1st, prophecies written after the event, as the book of Daniel; 2nd, those that simply proclaim the ultimate victory of good over evil, that wicked people shall be punished and the good rewarded; 3rd, prophecies that foretell the immediate future; and, 4th, old sayings that were quoted by later writers

to illustrate their meaning, or because the quotation seemed to them to 'fit in' with what they were saying.

"About the first kind of prophecy there is no need to speak. Of the second kind we find many, not only in the Bible, but elsewhere. The Apocrypha contains several that are very similar to those in the Old Testament; and I really cannot see why they should be refused if others are accepted. They are usually called forth to warn the people when given up to sin, or to comfort them in affliction or captivity with a promise of a deliverer.

"That these promises did not apply to Christ, I think we have evidence in the fact that so few Jews accepted him as such, which they certainly would have done if his life had been in accordance with the prophetic teaching.

"The prophecies of the third class were but the natural deductions of far-seeing patriots, and may be found in every age and country.

"Many of the sayings quoted in the New Testament belong to the fourth class, and were, I believe, simply brought in to illustrate the subject in hand. 'Fulfil,' Higginson tells us, is often used to mean 'illustrate' or the like. He quotes, from Dr. Palfrey's 'Relations between Judaism and Christianity,' some examples from the ancients in proof of this—as, for instance, 'Jerome uses this language :—"In us is that Socratic saying fulfilled, This little I know, that I know nothing," &c. &c.

"To take an instance of this case, let us turn to Matt. ii. 18. 'In Rama was there a voice heard, lamentation, and weeping, and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children, and would not be comforted, because they are not.' Now this is quoted from

Jer. xxxi. 15, where the prophet is speaking of the desolation of Ephraim. We cannot but think that the mention of such a simile is quite appropriate, but as a fulfilment of prophecy it is very weak. Bethlehem, the scene of the massacre in Christ's time, was in Judah, Rama in Ephraim. Judah was descended from Leah, Ephraim from Rachel; therefore a prophecy that an event was to occur in Rama and among the children of Rachel, could not be said to be fulfilled (in our sense of the word) by a similar event happening in Bethlehem among the children of Leah."

"That is true," said Ernest; "and if, as you say, it was the custom of the time to apply the term 'fulfil' to such accommodations, there is no ground for believing that Matthew meant it as a prophecy."

"Exactly; and now for just one other instance that has much weight with many. I mean that passage quoted in Matt. i. 22, 23—'Behold, a virgin shall be with child,' &c.—from Isaiah, vii. 14. If we turn to this seventh chapter, we see that Isaiah is speaking of the reign of King Ahaz, when his country is being invaded by the kings of Israel and Syria. 'The virgin' (which students tell us is more properly rendered 'young woman') was probably the wife of Ahaz; and you will notice that it says, 'Before the child shall know to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land that thou abhorrest shall be forsaken of both her kings.' Now can this be said to be true of Christ? As Higginson says, 'What new time of plenty dawned upon Judea when he began to know how to refuse the evil and choose the good? What opposing country became desolate when he grew into boyhood? And was his name really

Emmanuel? As an actual prediction actually fulfilled, the evangelist does not require us to regard it; nor will the connected words of Isaiah allow us to do so.'

"These, then, are just two examples of prophecy explained. We cannot go into this part of our subject any further to-day; but I trust that you will examine the matter more fully for yourselves."

"But, auntie," urged May, "would it not be presumption in us to set ourselves up as judges when we find that others, much more learned than we are, have already decided the question?"

"Ah, dear! I might agree with you if it were found that all great thinkers were of one opinion. But such is not the case, and we must choose on which side we shall range ourselves. Think! if each one accepted without question whatever he was told, where would have been our reformers? If Luther had simply listened to the teachings of the monks, he would have stifled his religious yearnings, and his work would have been unaccomplished. But, more than all, Christ, our greatest reformer and teacher, could never have fulfilled his mission had he simply deferred to the authority of those learned in the law, instead of listening to the divine voice of wisdom that bade him stand forth and preach a wider and a holier law."

"And," added Aunt Pollie, "might not other churches urge the same in support of their doctrines? The Mahomedans could point to the Koran and say that we ought to accept that as divine because their church holds it to be so. But you may answer, 'Mahomedans are not so numerous as Christians, and therefore the authority of their church is not so great.'

But if numbers are to decide, we must surely become Buddhists; for they include more followers than any other religious community. The circular mode of argument which is pursued by the Bishop of Lincoln and others may be used with equal justice by the Mahomedans, who prove the truth of their leader and his divine mission by reference to the Koran, and that of the Koran by an appeal to their church."

"The plea of antiquity," Aunt Amy went on, "can be put forth with equal justice by the Brahmans as by Christians; for some parts of the Vedas (their sacred books) are quite as ancient as our Bible; and therefore to say that the fact of its having been preserved so long is a sign of its being divinely inspired, is scarcely fair, unless we acknowledge that the Vedas are so for the same reason.

"But we must really break up our chat now, for it has already lasted almost twice its usual time."

"We have thoroughly enjoyed it," said Mary; "and Ernest took up the points of the Bishop's pamphlet so well that it was almost as good as reading it ourselves."

"He did, indeed," returned Aunt Amy; "and so, having finished your case, Ernest, I suppose you will expect me to undertake my defence next Sunday, and tell you more fully why I *do not* accept the Bible as literally 'the Word of God.'"

"Just so, auntie; and you will have a week to prepare your brief; so that we shall expect great things."

"I am afraid you will be disappointed then," answered Aunt Amy, smiling; "but, at any rate, I will do my best."

NINTH SUNDAY.

REASONS FOR NOT ACCEPTING THE BIBLE AS INFALLIBLY TRUE.

"AND now, auntie, have you prepared your defence?" asked Cara, laughing.

"I have thought a great deal about it," replied her aunt. "I intend dividing it in the same way as the Bishop of Lincoln does, and will try to show you that I cannot accept the Bible as absolutely true, because to me the testimony of God, of Christ, and of the Holy Spirit within me seem to be against it. The reason why I choose this division is to show you that often the same headings may be used to embody arguments diametrically opposed."

"I like that idea," said Ernest, much interested.

"But," continued his aunt gravely, "let me again remind you that our decision in this matter involves so much, that we must think about it earnestly and reverently. May is not the only one who fears it is presumption to meddle with these subjects; and indeed it is only because I believe so much practical good is taken from our religious life by glossing over strange statements that I venture at all upon such ancient ground. Often I feel tempted to relinquish my search; but then the thought that our mental powers were given us to be used reminds me that even our one talent, be it ever so small, should be devoted to the service of God's truth, and that it is therefore our imperative duty to search after it to the best of our ability.

Thus encouraged, I resume my quest, convinced that if my thoughts be unworthy, the waves of time will wash them away, leaving only those atoms of truth (if there be any) that must endure because of their affinity to God.

“And now for the testimony of God I shall not refer you to any book (for they are but the works of men), but I will ask you to look around on the direct works of God. Look through the microscope at the minute forms of animal life, and see how marvellous a creation is there! Notice the miracles of Nature, and watch how the tiny seed grows and develops into a strong and sturdy tree! Look at the forces of nature—electricity, magnetism, and the like,—and say if the Power that called them forth be not *Almighty*!

“Gaze into the heavens and note the planets and the stars, revolving in their perfect order, then on the different countries and see how every thing is suited to their various needs; ask the anatomist to tell how marvellous a structure is the human frame, and then tell me if the Creator be not *All-wise*!

“But, more than all, study the internal workings of the soul, notice how great and irresistible a power love and goodness have in the world in spite of all the evil that also finds a place there—how, even among the most degraded, we find traces of God’s spirit of love so strong and pure that we feel sure that in time, when men shall have learnt to do their duty aright, we have fair grounds for hope that goodness will gain a complete victory over evil. How beautiful is that love that has been implanted in the mother’s breast! When we think how sublime a thing is love, how it softens all

the hard places in our lives and gives powers of endurance where all else fail, shall we not acknowledge that He who gave to man such a glorious gift must be Himself *All-loving* ?

“Then, on the testimony of all these things, I maintain that any statement that supposes Him to be revengeful, capricious, and imperfect cannot be accepted as His word ; and because many passages implying this occur in the Bible, I will not, I cannot, accept it as the absolute word of God.

“We have already noticed many examples where human passions are ascribed to God ; and therefore I will only add two or three references to support my assertion—Gen. vi. 5 & 6, Ex. xii. 35 & 36, Ex. xxxii. 7–14, Num. xiv. 11–19, Joshua xi. 20, Judges iv. 9 & v. 24–31, 1 Chron. xxi. 1–15, 2 Kings i. 5–16, 2 Kings ii. 23 & 24.

“These are but a few specimens out of the many to be found in the Bible, that indicate the human character of its writings. If people would but remove the bandage of blind submission to authority from their eyes, they would be able to distinguish more easily truth from error, and between man’s conception of God and His real Nature—a nature which, as finite beings, we can but dimly comprehend, but which, we feel convinced, can at least contain nothing that is contrary to the highest moral ideal of humanity.”

“But people always say that God’s nature is perfect, even though they tell us that what the Bible says is true,” said Ernest. “I wonder how they reconcile the two !”

“They usually accept such statements as mysteries that it would be presumption to try to understand. It

is thought that they should be passed over without comment. For instance, a clergyman was one day speaking of the murder of Sisera by Jael and expressed his belief that God would never have counselled such a vile proceeding. After the sermon, some of his listeners lamented that the subject had been brought forward at all; 'it might unsettle the minds of some of his hearers,' they said, 'to have doubts cast upon the story in that way.'"

"But surely," urged Ernest, "if it were not true, it was right to say so. Why do people go on believing it all to be divine when they see such inconsistencies?"

"In many cases they do give up the belief; but it is a very difficult matter to set aside old associations, and often, very often, it also leads to giving up old friends. It is considered so dreadful a thing by so many, that they prefer 'leaving it till a more convenient season,' as did Felix. Besides, the Bible has been so long worshipped, I might almost say, and 'the Church' has been so much in the habit of looking there for all sorts of types and prophecies, that at last all has become so bound up together, that it is considered 'unsafe' to doubt a word contained therein."

"So Mr. Goodman used to tell us," said May. "'Once begin to doubt, and you will never stop until you have sunk into the pit of atheism,' was his warning."

"That is a strong expression, at any rate—and would deter many a timid soul from thinking any further, I have no doubt," replied her aunt. "And now we will pass on to the second division of our subject, and see how the teaching of Christ bears testimony against the infallibility of the Bible. I have already pointed out

some alterations that he made in the ancient laws, which to me seem to be evidence that he did not regard them as perfect. Again, when some of his disciples begged him to call down fire from heaven upon those who had treated him discourteously, he rebuked them. Now Elijah had done the same, and we are told that God showed his approval by answering his prayer, so that the various captains with their fifties were swallowed up by fire (2 Kings, i. 5-16). If Christ had believed that God actually did do this, would he not have considered such an action justifiable? but, in spite of the reference to Elijah, he sternly rebuked his followers for making such a cruel suggestion. Again, when he referred to the falling of the Tower of Siloam, did he not directly deny the statement, made by so many of the Old Testament writers, that accidents and misfortunes are necessarily punishments for sin? Indeed, throughout his teachings one can see that although there is naturally a great bias in favour of his beloved nation's laws, yet he ever allowed his reason and conscience to have supreme power, and subdued all external teaching to his own highest ideal of what was pure and true. For these reasons, then, I consider that the teachings of Christ forbid us to accept the Bible as the Word of God in its literal sense."

"And now," said Cara, seeing her aunt pause, "will you tell us how the Holy Ghost, or Holy Spirit as you call it, testifies against this doctrine?"

"I must first say a few words on what I believe to be the meaning of the term 'Holy Spirit.' To me it simply seems to imply that spirit of divine goodness that has a place in the heart of every human being,

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and which brings forth all the good deeds and pure thoughts that exist in the world. This seems to me the idea of the Psalmist (Ps. li. 11) and also that of nearly all the biblical writings. Indeed Vance Smith tells us that in the whole of the authenticated portions of the New Testament there are but two passages where the separate nature of the Holy Ghost is borne out at all (Matt. xxviii. 19, 2 Cor. xiii. 14) ; and these passages bear a very different meaning from that given in the Athanasian creed.

“1 John, v. 7, 8, which is so often quoted in support of the doctrine of the Trinity, has one verse interpolated, and should read (Vance Smith cites Dean Alford here) :—‘There are three that bear record, the Spirit, the water, and the blood; and these three agree in one.’ This makes the sense very different from the reading in the authorized version. For my own part, I believe the influence of the Holy Spirit to be two-fold—that of the *heart* and *intellect*. In the grosser forms of religions we find that neither of these is properly developed; and then worship is governed almost entirely by feeling, principally that of *fear*; and hence we find those inhuman rites and ceremonies that exist among the Hindoos and others. But still the divine spark of God’s Holy Spirit is there; and as civilization spreads its wings over the nations, so will the heart and intellect become better cultured and religion purified.

“In our own land also we often find the balance not duly maintained. On the one hand we find people inveighing against the use of reason in religion; and then the popular doctrines of original sin, hell, elec-

tion, and atonement become possible. Others, on the contrary, forget to listen to the teachings of the heart; and hence we have wise and true men who, like the Stoics of old, trace all to the action of immutable laws, without reference to the Author of those laws, who to me seems to be ever asserting His living and loving presence by the love and wisdom with which He fills the universe.

"I believe, then, that Reason and Heart are parts of God's Holy Spirit; and in proportion as they are properly developed, will religion become pure and holy. Reason will tell us that a 'First Cause' must exist—call it by what name we will. She will further teach us, from a knowledge of the wisdom and order of the universe, that the Creative Power must be wonderfully wise and mighty. Then must the Heart assert her sway and show us that to these attributes must be added the supreme power of Love—that power which is the mainspring of all good actions and the parent of Faith and Hope.

"When the Holy Spirit has thus doubly inspired our souls, we shall bow down in thankfulness before the God of all, and endeavour to set our lives in harmony with Him, so that our every action may be a stepping-stone towards His perfection."

"But how," asked Cara, "does this Holy Spirit bear upon the infallibility of the Bible?"

"In this way. It will forbid our accepting any statement about God that falls short of our highest ideal of perfection. How can we accept as a literal fact that cruel story about the bears being sent from Heaven to devour children when they mocked Elijah?

or that God would send a pestilence among a whole nation for the sin (or mistake) of one man, as in David's case? or, again, that He whose dominions are so infinite, would regard with undue favour one minute portion of His people, while He condemned others, who were equally His children, to everlasting perdition?

"For these reasons, then, I cannot accept the writings contained in the Bible as absolutely and entirely true; nor do I for a moment believe that the writers meant to imply that they were so, in the now popular sense, at all. To me it appears to be an outgrowth of the religion of Christ, not an essential part of it; otherwise surely the early councils would have made it one of their first duties to make a list of the inspired books."

"I was told," said Ernest, "that if we did not accept the Bible as divine, we must acknowledge it to be a 'book of falsehood.'"

"Some say so, I know," returned his aunt; "but I think I have shown you, in our first few Sundays, that there is another way, besides extolling it as divine or condemning it as wilfully false. The same spirit that bids me reject the book as infallibly true, compels me to love and reverence much of its contents, because of the beauty, truth, and wisdom that we find there. How truthful and full of poetry are the breathings of many of the Psalms! much of the prophetic teachings, how inspiring and impressive! What divinity in St. Paul's words where he exhorts each one to use well his special gifts, 'for it is the same God that worketh all in all!' and, further, that to all our talents we must

strive to add that holiest one—the spirit of love and charity. Again, can we fail to acknowledge the truth of what St. James declares?—‘To him who knoweth to do good and doeth it not, to him it is sin,’ and ‘Faith without works is dead,’ which words find a practical illustration in the whole life and teaching of Jesus Christ. While the record of such a life as his finds a place in our Bibles, there need be no fear of its losing its hold over the hearts of men. The parables he taught, the truths he uttered, and, most of all, the life he lived, show us the capabilities with which God has endowed his people, and will always stimulate those who are indeed followers of Christ to strive to live a life worthy of their leader.”

“Thank you very much for all you have told us,” said Mary. “You have given us plenty of food for thought to-day.”

“Auntie,” added May, “there is one more question I should like to ask you. People lay so much stress on the unity of the teaching of the Bible. Now, I often come upon passages that seem to teach quite different lessons; and so I can’t understand what they mean by the ‘unity of the Bible.’”

“I do not wonder at your perplexity,” returned her aunt. “I confess I do not find any more unity there than exists in the record of the special history of any nation. The idea of a God possessed by the ancient Hebrews was very different from that held by some of the psalmists and prophets; and, again, the God whom Christ loved and worshipped was a higher development than either.

“Indeed it is in this progressive teaching that the

essential value of the Bible lies, I believe: it contains no code of fixed immutable laws, as does the Koran for instance; but it is the record of the greatest minds of the various ages of their searching after God, if haply they might find Him. And more especially, if we turn to the teachings of Jesus Christ, do we find him thrusting on one side all fixed laws and ceremonies (Matt. xv. & xxiii. and Luke vi.), and including all the duty of man under one command, 'Love to God and Man,'—thus pointing out to his followers and to future ages the spirit that should animate every action, but leaving to each the task of following it out according to that way which seemeth best."

"You spoke, auntie, at the beginning of this afternoon's chat," said Ernest, "about the doctrines of hell, election, original sin, and atonement. Might we have them for our subject next Sunday? and then will you kindly tell us why you do not accept them? for I have been told that it is very wicked to doubt their being true."

"Oh! do, auntie," exclaimed Cara; "for I have so often read tracts about them."

"Certainly, if you wish it," replied Aunt Amy; "I think that will make a very good subject. But you must hasten home now; and next Sunday we will talk about some of the doctrines of Popular Theology."

TENTH SUNDAY.

SOME OF THE DOCTRINES OF POPULAR THEOLOGY.

"To-day, then, we are to discuss certain doctrines that are popularly supposed to be vital parts of Christianity, but which some of us regard as outgrowths from it," said Aunt Amy.

"With which are we to begin?" asked Ernest. "Perhaps the doctrine of original sin should come first," replied his aunt, "with its attendant belief in a hell—a belief which, although happily fast passing out of the region of *popular* theology, has yet too strong a hold to be quite overlooked."

"As to the belief in original sin," said Cara, "I suppose it falls to the ground at once, if we do not accept the story of Adam's disobedience as literal truth."

"I think so," answered Aunt Amy, "and thus you see I was right in saying that so very much was involved in the question of divine inspiration. For, once rejected, we refuse to accept a statement that implies an act of such injustice on the part of our All-just Creator. Think for a moment what such a belief implies! Can we imagine that God would form creatures simply to doom them to destruction? that He could be so merciless and cruel as to create human beings with the possibility of erring, and then punish them eternally for their sins?"

"But still evil does exist," remarked May thoughtfully; "and therefore may not people naturally conclude that it proves the truth of original sin?"

"You remind me there," said her aunt, "of a little

incident that happened when Mary was quite a tiny child. Her uncle used to conjure all sorts of things for her amusement; and one day he made a pincushion out of nothing, as it were. She was delighted with her prize; and her grandpapa, thinking it was time to undeceive her, said, "You know, Mary, your pincushion did not really come out of nothing; when you grow older you will understand that that would be impossible." But 'No,' answered the little one, holding fast to her treasure, fearing lest it should disappear, and looking earnestly into grandpapa's face; 'when I am older, I shall still believe; for *here is the pincushion.*' You, too, dear May, know that evil does exist, and are therefore prepared to accept any theory that will account for it."

"Perhaps so, auntie," answered May, looking puzzled; "but still it seems very difficult to reconcile the existence of evil with the goodness of God."

"It is indeed very, very difficult," replied Aunt Amy. "But we must try to find some solution to the problem that will yet be in keeping with our ideal of moral perfection. We should surely feel that the Maker and controller of so many marvellous works must have some wise reason for permitting evil, although as yet we may not be able to find it out."

"How, then, do you account for the presence of evil?" asked Ernest.

"I cannot do so. I can and do think about it often; and I have certain ideas on the subject, which, to my mind, do much towards explaining it. They are but speculations, however; and we must always be careful to discriminate between such and real facts. If you would like to hear what they are, we will take the considera-

tion of evil as our subject next Sunday—but on this condition, that you accept what I say as my ‘opinion’ merely, and not as a settled truth.”

“Oh! thank you, auntie,” said Cara; “we shall be so glad to hear your thoughts about it.”

“But, auntie,” said Ernest, “this doctrine of original sin teaches that as all men have sinned they are doomed to perdition, and it is only in believing that Jesus Christ is God, and has washed away our sins by His blood, that the dreadful judgment can be averted. In that case people must believe that will be your lot.”

“They *think* they believe so, Ernest!”

“Think they believe!” he repeated. “That is a strange expression! They surely *know* what they really believe!”

“One would imagine so at a first glance,” answered his aunt; “but still, odd as it may seem, I think my expression is right, after all. People are taught that certain dogmas are to be accepted as truths without question. But when it comes home practically to them, they evade it in some way. For instance, a lady died some time back, who did not accept the doctrine of atonement at all, but simply felt that in the hands of a just and loving God all would be well. Now, when her relatives were grieving over the loss of one they loved so well, what comfort, think you, could be offered by their orthodox friends? If they actually believed this doctrine of atonement, would they not have cried, ‘Weep on, poor mourners! for there is no hope left! she for whom you are sorrowing is now awaiting her doom, and will henceforward have her portion in the bottomless lake where the fire is not quenched and the worm dieth not?’

"But no! the gentler teaching of love and sympathy throws to the winds such harsh and cruel words, and in their place are heard the gentle tones, 'Take comfort; your loved one has indeed gone from your midst, but she is still in the hands of God, and surely you may trust her to His tender care.' It is because of such sayings as these that I say, although these doctrines are held by many, the true import of them is not realized."

"Besides," added Aunt Pollie, "if it were *really* believed, how full of terror death would be. If a friend were taken, in what agony would be the mourners, for fear lest the gates of heaven should be closed against the departed one. That some do realize this doctrine, our mad asylums testify; and indeed insanity seems to me only the natural result of a real acceptance of this awful dogma."

"I remember," said Mary, "hearing a young clergyman give an anecdote about this in a sermon; and it made his hearers quite angry. He told us that he had been called to the bedside of a dying man. This man had led a good, honest life, but he did not accept Christ as his Saviour. The clergyman talked and prayed with him, but failed to make him confess his reliance on the blood of Jesus. Then, when the visit was ended, the man asked, 'Shall I be saved?' Most anxiously did the poor wife echo the momentous question; 'but,' said the clergyman, 'I was obliged to turn away without answering, for I could not say yes.' This story made quite a sensation; for the congregation were so shocked by the want of charity it displayed."

"And yet," said Aunt Amy, "he was evidently an

earnest preacher, and only spoke according to the teaching of his church. But thus it is such doctrines are accepted as articles of faith; but, happily, they have no real root in the hearts of men."

"Is the doctrine of election as universally held as that of hell?" asked Cara.

"I think not," replied her aunt, "although by some (the Calvinists, for example) it is insisted on most strongly. I heard a most forcible sermon upon it once in one of their chapels."

"What did the preacher say?" asked Cara.

"Well! he said a great deal, for he talked for fully an hour," said Aunt Amy, smiling. "But what struck me most was this. He told us that unless we believed that our sins had been washed away by the blood of Christ, and that Christ was in very truth the Most High God, we were but Satan's lying slaves and should have our portion in hell. At the same time he declared that it was impossible for us to believe this saving clause unless special grace were given us, and that the number of the elect was very small."

"Something like the old gardener in one of Miss Dickens's stories," said Cara, "who says, 'Only me and a few others will be saved.'"

"Exactly," returned her aunt. "What an intensely selfish comfort such a doctrine must give at best; but although people say such strange things, their actions almost always prove them to be far better than their creed."

"What do you think of the doctrine of the atonement?" asked May. Is there not something very restful and comforting in the idea that you may carry all

your sins and troubles to Jesus, and he will bear them all in your stead?"

"There may be something very inviting in such a belief when one is weary and sick at heart; but surely it is cowardly to allow some one else to bear your burden. To make our religion of real service we must examine each point and see if it be true, not simply whether it be easy. Here is an illustration to show you what I mean. An earnest preacher was once talking with some friends, when the conversation turned upon bees, and the structure of their cells. Turning to a scientific gentleman, at whose house they were assembled, he asked if the cells were made hexagonal by the bees, or compressed into that form afterwards by the ordinary laws of Nature? 'Ah!' exclaimed one of the listeners, 'What does it signify? anyhow it is very beautiful!' 'Yes, madam,' replied the clergyman, turning round; 'but *I want to know which is true.*' This phrase contained, I believe, the watchword of his life, and led him to persist in his search after truth, in spite of the many obstacles that beset his path. Now let us try to act in this spirit here. What is really the doctrine of the atonement? We will try to analyze it. The wise Creator—He who doeth all things well—has created a race of human beings whom He has endowed with certain capabilities. In process of time, however, they (according to this theory) have become so incurably wicked that they are in bondage to the Power of Evil (or, as has been taught in the later centuries, are accursed of God). In either case the issue is the same. The *Almighty* is yet too powerless to save His people from the consequences of their sin, without the payment

of a ransom too great for mankind to pay. But at last a solution is found; God's only begotten Son offers to be sacrificed in the people's stead and thus satisfy all claims. And so the Son becomes a human soul, and after thirty years' sojourn on this earth, fulfils his mission by dying on the cross. But even now the redemption is incomplete; for the fiat goes forth that none who do not accept Christ as their Saviour will be saved; so the greater part of mankind will still have to suffer their terrible doom."

"Ah! auntie, when you describe it in that way it does not seem beautiful at all," said May; "but yet many people seem to derive much comfort from the thought that a Mighty One has died to save them from sin."

"I know that it is so; still I cannot help feeling that we may find a truer and more strengthening comfort than that. If we accept such a doctrine we must infer that God is either not all-powerful, or that He is not all-loving; otherwise He could never have permitted His creatures to fall so irretrievably into sin. Again, can we imagine Him punishing the innocent instead of the guilty? No! surely not! When we sin, let us meet our punishment bravely, knowing that it is only for our good that the Lord chastiseth, and that it is as necessary for our amendment as medicine is for the body; and in the same way as one person's disease cannot be cured by his friend's taking the medicine, so our sins cannot be cleansed by another bearing the punishment.

"And then, again, this idea seems to me to take all the merit away from Jesus Christ, for what more glorious privilege could be accorded to any one than to be

allowed to avert the sufferings of those around us. What wife, what mother, what sister would not willingly suffer, if through it the pain of her husband, child, or brother could be lessened? Is not the impossibility of thus bearing another's burden often one of the greatest griefs that we know? Why, then, should Christ be eulogized for dying a martyr's death, with such a reward in view? Some earnest people have thought of this, I know, and answer truly that if that were all, his position might indeed have been one to be envied; and so they have cast about for something more; and now they tell us that the sufferings of Christ are never ending—that every sin committed adds a fresh wound. What a frightful idea is this! how it originated I do not know; but certainly I cannot find any evidence of it in the Bible, the one book whence it is supposed all these doctrines have their origin."

"I cannot help thinking," said Aunt Pollie, "that Christ would be sadly vexed were he to revisit the earth now, and see what strange beliefs and ceremonies are in use among his followers. Max Müller says, 'no religion can continue to be what it was during the lifetime of its founder and its first apostles!' Surely of none can this be more truly said than of the religion Jesus taught us! He, whose faith in God called forth that sublime parable of the Prodigal Son, where the poor sinner is gladly received back to his father's house and accorded full forgiveness without the intervention of any brother or mediator—how could he be said to have taught that his death was needed to bring men to their Heavenly Father. If he had meant to teach this, I cannot but think that he would have shadowed it

forth in this parable; and therefore as a follower of his I could not accept the doctrine, even if the impossibility of accepting such statements as implying injustice and want of power in our God did not compel me to deny it."

"Then you do not think Christ had any special mission on earth, I suppose," asked May.

"Indeed we do," returned Aunt Amy. "We believe that Christ has done humanity the greatest possible service that any one can do, by showing how good and holy we may become if we do our best. See what a stride he made in the religious history of the world! He showed God to the people as a Father to be loved, not a Deity to be feared and pacified. He told them that no one need despair, for God wills not that the least of His little ones should perish. He discriminated between the observance of mere ceremony and the leading of a pure life. He made himself beloved by his followers, and then set before them the mainspring of his actions—love and trust in God. In his parable of the talents, and elsewhere, he bade his followers do their utmost in the work of God's world; and in the hour of his trial he showed them by his own example how to trust in God and to bear misfortune. Who, then, will say that Christ had no mission on earth? Who will wonder that his disciples, full of love and veneration for so true a teacher, should think him worthy to be ranked as a God, even as were the emperors and heroes of the day? And who will marvel that around the memory of so pure a spirit, mysteries and wonder-stories should arise, in the same way as they did around the lives of all in those days who had left their mark in the world?"

"Did people believe in miracles and wonders more then than they do now?" asked Cara.

"Very much more. The lives of the saints abound in them; and therefore it is that I cannot understand why Christ should be supposed to have proved himself a God through the miracles he is supposed to have wrought. Josephus, for instance, who was so very learned for the times in which he lived, yet believed that some people had the power of casting out demons; for he tells us that among the gifts bestowed on Solomon 'God also enabled him to learn that skill which expels demons, which is a science useful and sanative to men. And he (Solomon) left behind him the manner of using exorcisms by which they drive away demons so that they never return; and this method of cure is of great force unto this day; for I have seen a certain man of my own country, whose name was Eleazer, releasing people who were demoniacal in the presence of Vespasian and his sons, and his captains, and the whole multitude of his soldiers.' He then describes the way in which it is done in a manner that quite reminds one of the conjuror's tricks of the present day."

"How curious! I should like to read the account of that," exclaimed Ernest. "Of course the Cæsars and others were made gods after death; and strange and miraculous stories are told of all the great men in the early times; but no one would think of believing this to be a part of their true history. I suppose that it is one of the results of the belief in the inspiration of the Bible that we accept the Gospel miracles as facts, although we do not hesitate to put them aside as out-

growths of the age when we meet with them in other histories."

"Just so," returned Aunt Amy, "we should always try to place ourselves as much as possible in the times when the writers lived. That is why it is interesting to refer to the works of Josephus, because he lived at the same time as the first followers of Christ."

"But still," said Ernest, "such a doctrine as the atonement could hardly have sprung up without any foundation, I should think."

"Certainly not," answered his aunt. "But you know that when one religion supersedes another—and indeed it is the same with other things—we constantly find offshoots of the old mingling with the new. For example, Dean Stanley tells us that Constantine, the Christian Emperor, imperceptibly mingled with his new faith many remnants of his old. His coins had the letters of Christ on one side, while on the other was portrayed the figure of the Sun god; again, one of his statues was in the form of Apollo, but the glory of the sunbeams around him was composed of the emblems of the Crucifixion. This grafting of the old on to the new is unavoidable; and it is from this that so many strange incongruities arise. In the religion of Egypt the idea of vicarious suffering was well known; and in the Jewish laws themselves, I think, we may find an origin of the doctrine."

"How do you mean?" asked Cara.

"Well, you know it was an ancient custom among the Jews to offer sacrifices to God. When Moses allowed or, indeed, ordered it, I think it was an instance of great wisdom; for people could then only be

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made to feel through their senses ; and therefore, by obliging them to give up, beyond all chance of recovery, some cherished object, he would make them realize the evil of sin.

“Now, on a certain day of the year (the day of atonement) Moses commanded that the high priest should assemble with the people (Lev. xvi.). Two goats were to be brought, one of which was to be sacrificed ; and over the other the people were to confess their sins ; then it was to be driven into the wilderness, laden, as was supposed, with the sins of the people.”

“What a strange custom !” exclaimed Cara.

“It was, truly. To this goat was given the name of ‘scape-goat ;’ and hence arises the word so common among us of ‘scape-grace,’ which is, I believe, simply a corruption of it. In process of time, however, the idea of sacrifice gave way before better and purer feeling : this may be seen in the exclamation of the Psalmist (Ps. li. 16, 17) and in the chidings of Isaiah (i. 10–17). Christ realized even more fully the uselessness of sacrifice, as we read in ‘The Prodigal Son’ and elsewhere. But the old idea was too firmly rooted in the Jewish mind to be totally annihilated ; and after a while it worked its way to the surface. Christ’s followers loved and revered him so much for his pure life and teaching, and also for his willingness even to die an ignominious death rather than give up what he believed to be true, that they must indeed have felt that through him they were brought nearer to goodness and to God. Then, it may have been, the remembrance that sacrifices had been abolished suggested the

idea that some great one must have been offered to appease, once for all, the wrath of God ; and so, I think, it grew, until Christ was acknowledged as the 'scape-goat' offered for mankind, and thus the elaborate scheme of the atonement may have been originated—a doctrine which, I believe, would have been more repugnant to the pure mind of Jesus Christ than the many practices of his times against which he was so justly indignant."

"Yes, indeed," answered May; 'if the doctrine was not of his teaching, it must be quite repugnant to it: but I confess that I do not feel quite satisfied to accept your explanation; it is so contrary to all that I have hitherto heard. At least I must think it out first," added she timidly.

"I am very, very glad to hear you say so, dear May," answered Aunt Amy. "Remember, these are only *opinions*, and we should be extremely sorry if you accepted them simply because we did. We want you to think earnestly on these things; doubt as much as you like; as long as you strive after the truth sincerely and intelligently, you cannot go far wrong. I should like, however, to conclude this long afternoon's chat with a few words from Locke:—'The imputation of novelty is a terrible charge amongst those who judge of men's heads as they do of their perukes, by the fashion, and can allow none to be right but the received doctrines. Truth scarce ever yet carried it by vote anywhere at its first appearance; new opinions are always suspected, and usually opposed, without any other reason but because they are not already common. But truth, like gold, is none the less so for being

newly brought out of the mine. It is trial and examination must give it price, and not any antique fashion ; and though it be not yet current by the public stamp, yet it may, for all that, be as old as nature, and is certainly not the less genuine.' ”

ELEVENTH SUNDAY.

THE EXISTENCE OF EVIL.

"You promised last Sunday," said Ernest to Aunt Amy, "that you would talk with us to-day about evil, and tell us what were your thoughts about it."

"I will do my best," replied his aunt. "But, as I then told you, my thoughts are merely speculative, and you must agree to accept them as such, and not as proven truths. Evil seems so contrary to the love and wisdom with which we are surrounded, that it is indeed difficult how to account for it; but when we try to do so we must be careful to seek a cause that will not degrade our ideal of a just and loving Deity."

"Auntie," said May, "I was reading the other day a sermon upon evil, and the preacher seemed to think that evil is more prevalent than good in the world."

"I should be sorry to agree with him there," answered Aunt Amy. "Many people say the same; but I think the tenacity with which almost all cling to life shows that this world of ours has more of good in it than evil, or surely they would be glad to quit it."

"Those who believe in Adam's disobedience and fall," said Ernest, "I suppose, have no difficulty in finding a reason for evil; for they ascribe it to the work of the devil. And I have often been told that we must believe in Satan or we shall be forced to acknowledge that sin and evil are sent by God Himself."

"But surely, Ernest, it would be imputing something

far worse to Him if we believed that He would create so horrible a power as Satan is supposed to be ; besides, that He, being all-powerful, would allow an evil spirit to gain such a mastery over mankind as some aver, seems to me incredible."

"It does, indeed," Aunt Pollie went on ; "I cannot help thinking that the idea formed by one of our greatest thinkers, who has now passed away, is far superior. He says that the presence of evil compels him either to believe that God is not all-powerful, or that He is not benevolent ; and as he finds so many proofs of His benevolence, he prefers believing Him to be good and just, in so far as his power extends."

"There is something very grand and positive about the faith of such a belief," added Aunt Amy ; "but, at the same time, I think the presence of evil will some day be shown to be not inconsistent with the omnipotence of our God. As yet 'we see through a glass darkly ;' but even so, I think we may find some reasons for believing that God has a wise object in allowing sin and evil to assail us. In the first place, as we have, even with our limited knowledge, so many proofs of the wisdom, power, and love that govern the various parts of the universe, we are surely justified in believing that evil is not 'the desire,' may I say, of God, but only an outgrowth which He permits to exist for some wise, although to us unknown reason. Now let us try whether we may not be able to find some solution to this difficult problem. I think we may assume that evil is more prevalent among mankind than among the other creations of God. For instance, the planets go their way in perfect order and regularity ; the rocks are formed with

unerring precision; the instincts of the animals, the 'fitness' of all things, fill us with wonder. In man, however, this perfection is by no means so apparent. True, he is formed most beautifully, and his capabilities seem almost unlimited at times; but then sin and suffering are constantly his portion. Why is this? Let us think. Who will tell me what are the gifts that most distinguish man from beast?"

"His reasoning and thinking powers, are they not?" asked Ernest.

"Yes; it is these which give him individuality. Now these powers would be almost useless, and, indeed, could scarcely exist, without the accompanying gift of *free will*; and it is to the addition of this that, I think, we may trace much of the evil in the world."

"Then, auntie," said Mary, "do you mean to say that free will is bad?"

"Certainly not. All God's gifts are good; but in according unto man this most glorious one, He has indeed made him 'but little lower than the angels.' It is surely a nobler lot to be allowed to win perfection for ourselves, at almost any cost, than to be simply machines, without any power of regulating our actions. That God can construct such, we have evidence in the starry worlds; but to man He has given something higher, something far more ennobling, the gift of free will. But, like other high and lofty powers, it requires to be properly understood and developed before it can achieve its proper place in the world. Man has to learn how to choose aright, and thus make his actions harmonize with the laws of God. While learning to do this, he must of necessity often make mistakes; and

this will result in some of the laws being broken. Now, if a law be a good one, it follows that a violation of it must be bad ; and therefore, until man has properly educated his power of choice, evil must find a place among us."

"But," said Cara, "if such violation be the result of simple mistakes, as well as error, surely God would be unjust to allow evil to spring from it?"

"Undoubtedly, if that were all ; but my theory goes further. For the proper strengthening and development of our nature some battle with adversity (in one form or another) may be necessary, even as gold has to be purified by fire ; but to keep the effect of the practice of free will from totally destroying the happiness of humanity, God, in His justice, has made compensating laws, or laws of reparation."

"And what are they?" asked Cara.

"One of the most valuable is perhaps that of habit. This is often appropriately called second nature ; and, indeed, to how many things may we accustom ourselves by its power ? The beneficence of this gift to man is rarely appreciated to its full extent ; and Dugald Stewart declares that 'in computing the happiness or misery of mankind, sufficient allowance is scarcely ever made for its powerful influence.'"

"But," said Cara, "habit will not compensate for all the misery in the world. It would be but poor comfort to any one in trouble, simply to say 'You will get used to it.' It may be true for the distant future ; but before the habit has grown, very much pain and trouble must exist."

"I grant that fully," returned her aunt ; "and the

dreadful reality of pain and suffering cannot be denied. But, besides our hope of a future life, of which we will not speak more just now, there are other laws of reparation as well as habit, which may do much to modify the present pain. To mankind has God intrusted the power of helping. In the hearts of men He has implanted the germs of sympathy, self-denial, and helpfulness; and if these be duly cultured they will bring forth fruits that will make of earth itself a heaven. This idea is totally different from the one entertained by so many, who tell us that sin and suffering exist, so as to educate in man certain sympathetic qualities. Such a supposition seems to me preposterous; for surely God would not afflict some of His people on purpose to bring out virtue in others. But it is quite a different thing to believe that as evil does exist in the world, the powers of sympathy and helpfulness are parts of the beneficent scheme for repairing the mistakes and errors of man."

"I think I understand your meaning," said Ernest; "but will you tell me, please, whether you agree with that saying that is so often quoted—'Whatever is, is right'?"

"There is some truth in it, I suppose," answered Aunt Amy, "although I do not like it altogether; for it often confuses the direct agency of God with an effect caused by the violation of His laws. For instance, take the case of an unseaworthy vessel that is sent out on a voyage. Some mishap occurs, the ship is wrecked, and its passengers are lost. Can it be said that God wished these people to be drowned? Surely not: the catastrophe was the result of a violation of a God-given

law, and not of His desire to destroy the lives of human beings."

"But," exclaimed Cara, "it comes to the same thing in the end; for the lives are lost just the same."

"They are. At the same time, there appears to me to be as much difference between the two, as between a verdict of manslaughter and one that implies wilful murder. Again, I consider that the phrase 'Whatever is, is right' contains no real, strengthening comfort; for when people have a sorrow to bear that is almost crushing them, they grow impatient with such words, and in their hearts they rebel against the seeming injustice of God. 'I cannot see the justice of it;' they cry, 'what have we done that we should be thus afflicted?' I know that we are told that this is a wrong spirit in which to meet misfortune; and so it is; but when heavy sorrows crowd around, it will be impossible to stifle this feeling as long as we make the mistake of attributing to God the evils that result from an ignorance or misconception of His laws."

"Then what comfort," asked May, "can we have in times of affliction?"

"If we believe in the workings of the divine laws of reparation, we have a true and really 'tonic one,'" replied Aunt Amy. "We shall say, 'I know that in spite of my misfortunes my life may be useful and good; and although I cannot now understand the reason of them, yet being convinced of the goodness of the laws of God, I will not allow my life to be blighted by useless repinings.' By this, I do not for a moment mean that we should stifle all natural sorrow; that blunting of feeling can never be good for our moral

nature ; but we should learn to hold it in subjection, lest it usurp the place of some real duties that require all our energies for their fulfilment. If God's laws are perfect, then we should make it our aim and object to set our lives in harmony with them ; and if we do our best to 'press forward to the mark of our high calling,' we shall make, even of our failures, sorrows, and misfortunes, steppingstones to a higher and fuller life."

"We may also notice," said Aunt Pollie, "that all nature teems with examples of these compensating laws. I remember hearing, in a sermon, of an example of this shown in a railway-cutting,—how, at first, the deep gash made in the sides of the peaceful meadow seemed to take all beauty from the landscape—how, as time went on, Dame Nature brought her powers to bear to mend the view ; she could not make it as it was before ; the gash was made and must remain ; so she set to work to do the best she could with it ; and she succeeded so well that before long nothing could be seen of the unsightly cutting, save a grassy slope that added a fresh beauty to the surrounding scenery."

"That is a pretty simile," said Mary, "it is quite a parable."

"It is indeed, and one that will teach us many a practical lesson, if we think about it. Time also is a great worker in this cause ; and when he breathes his gentle spirit over the rugged past, it becomes so softened and beautified that we may look back upon our old sorrows with serenity and even happiness."

"I do so like the idea of those laws of reparation," exclaimed May.

"And so do I, dear," returned Aunt Amy. "It

is a glorious thought to feel that we have the privilege of working with God in the world. What comfort, too, is there here for the fainting spirit and the weak heart! hope and courage are the words they whisper—hope, that we may become wiser and better and therefore more truly happy, because acting more in harmony with God, and courage to fight the fight of life bravely; for we know that it is possible to make, even of our errors, weaknesses, and mistakes, ‘steps unto heaven.’”

“We must not forget,” added Aunt Pollie, “that these theories are useless to us unless they produce real fruit in our lives. We must remember that if we are endowed with capabilities so that we may subdue even the laws of nature to our will, we must cultivate those capabilities as far as possible. Again, if to man is due the existence of so much evil, should it not be his earnest and active desire to help to the utmost in its alleviation? How much might be done if this were only realized among us! I do not mean only in great deeds, but in every trifling thing; a word of sympathy, an act of self-denial, a look of love—it is in these more especially that we may make ourselves constant co-workers with God.”

“There is yet another branch of evil,” said Mary, “about which we have not spoken, auntie. I mean the law of death; surely its power should not be overlooked.”

“Certainly not; for, in any consideration of evil, death must take a prominent place. I have not spoken of it to-day, because I thought we should be fully occupied without. Next Sunday, however, if you like, we will devote to that part of the subject. To some it may

appear a gloomy one ; but I wish very much to have a chat with you upon it. It is not at the time of trial that we can look calmly into the matter ; we must do that in our cooler moments ; and then when the blast comes we shall be somewhat prepared to withstand it, although it is not until then that we shall really know whether our comfort be built on a rock and so be able to endure."

TWELFTH SUNDAY.

ON DEATH.

When the company had assembled on the following Sunday, there was an earnest look on their faces which showed that they had not forgotten what was to be the subject for this afternoon.

"To-day," Aunt Amy began, "we are to talk about death, that dark-robed angel of God, who so often seems to be an enemy to mankind. Let us try to discover first what is his mission in the world. I am not now referring to any particular case; but, in the abstract, is he to be shunned or welcomed?"

"I can't see why we should welcome him," exclaimed Cara. "He doesn't seem to do any good—except perhaps to teach us resignation," added she, after a slight pause.

"I should not call that one of the primary uses of death," returned her aunt. "No doubt, resignation is brought out by it, together with much more attendant good; but this, I think, is due to the workings of those laws of reparation about which we were speaking last Sunday. But let us think about its general effect in the world.

"Mankind, being imperfect, is liable to error; if therefore the same people remained here eternally, their errors and mistakes would become so firmly rooted that they could not be eradicated. As it is, a man has not time to do the world an irreparable wrong; and so he can be endowed with free will to choose his way for himself, with-

out being permitted to live long enough to do irretrievable damage. In fact, progress would be impossible without death. As Moses, when in the wilderness with the Israelites, was forced to stay there until the generation that had lived in bondage had passed away, and another educated to the work he had in hand, so it is throughout the world; the old must be tested, sifted, and examined by the new. And as in the rising of the tide the waves often recede again and again, so that the water appears to be going down, and yet in due season it reaches its height,—so with humanity; although it sways backwards and forwards from truth to error, at times appearing to recede from the highest point, yet an examination of the history of the past will teach us that we are progressing surely, if it be but slowly; and Hope will bid us go bravely on until we reach that full tide of perfection to which Faith points the way."

"I can understand," said Cara, "that wicked people must be got rid of to make progress possible; but why should not the good remain?"

"You forget," said Aunt Amy, "that good and evil, truth and error are so intermingled that no one is either entirely good or entirely bad, and so it is necessary for all to pass away. But there is another and a better reason, I think. Our life on earth seems to be only a larger edition, as it were, of our school-life, and may well be compared to it. Now, when a child first goes to school it is put into a low class, is it not?"

"Of course," answered Cara, "it must first conquer the ABC of knowledge; but when it has mastered that, it will be raised to a higher one."

"Exactly; and so it is, I believe, with us. Our life

here seems to me to be just one of the classes of the school of eternity. We have very much to learn in it, and many difficulties to surmount; but after a certain period we ought so to have used our opportunities that we are ready to pass from our earthly discipline to a higher and nobler sphere, thus gradually progressing towards that perfection which is the aim of every true soul."

"But, auntie," said Ernest, "some people believe in no future life; how can we prove that there is one?"

"We can have no actual proof," answered Aunt Amy; "but for all that, there are so many evidences in favour of it that to me its existence seems as sure as if it could be mathematically proved. In the first place, there appears to be a natural instinct in favour of such a belief, in the same way as we are naturally inclined to love our parents. I do not mean to say that these instincts may not be crushed; for unless properly nurtured, it is as natural for them to be stifled as for good seed to die if it be planted in bad soil. That this instinct is natural to man, I think we may infer from the fact that there is scarcely a tribe or nation that has not some idea, however wild, of a future life. However, there seems to me a better evidence than this in the incompleteness of our present life and in the evil which surrounds us. To quote Edward Maitland's words, 'It is not the good who are to me a proof of the hereafter, but the bad,—and that, not for their chastisement, but for their development—that is, the development in them of the moral sense—a development necessary, one would suppose, for God's own satisfaction as well as for their benefit: that is, if, like man, He hates leaving any portion of His work unfinished.'"

"That is a glorious thought," said Aunt Pollie. "There is also another idea of the same kind in his book of By-and-Bye, where he says, 'Whatever is beautiful and good continues, by force of its own attraction, to endure and grow; while that which is obnoxious becomes dispersed, and vanishes by force of its own inherent antagonism to the general conditions of existence.'"

"Yes," continued Aunt Amy, "that supposition that evil will in the end disappear because of its want of harmony with God, is very beautiful. Without the idea of a future life the presence of evil seems, indeed, as Stuart Mill believed, to betray either want of power or benevolence in the Creator,—with it, the difficulty is, I think, solved immediately. We never say that parents are unjust because they educate their children and subject them to the tedium of learning, for we know that they will be all the happier in after years for the discipline thus imposed. And if by certain suffering and discipline we are prepared for a nobler sphere of action, then their presence does not imply any want of love or power to our Maker; but if no future exist, then suffering seems to have no adequate compensation. Mind! I do not mean to say that if this theory be not correct, suffering is unjust; but only that as yet I have found no other solution to the problem, that appears to me reconcilable with the perfection that we believe to exist in the Divine Spirit from whom we derive our being.

"And now, let us pass on to a more personal idea of death. Although we may all agree that death in the abstract may be beneficial, or even in cases where it assails those whom old age has overtaken and whose

faculties have left them, we know they are not the only ones that the dread reaper claims for his own. How are we to regard death when he takes away the younger members of our circle, those perhaps who are only just starting on life's journey, and who have prepared for the battle without as yet having begun the fight? Or, again, what shall we say when those who are in the midst of the turmoil—fathers and mothers—are called away from their little ones, leaving them helpless and alone? Can death be good then?"

"No! surely not;" exclaimed Cara vehemently, "it must be a bad and cruel law! It seems so very, very dreadful!"

"Indeed, it does," returned her aunt; "and I cannot bear to hear it spoken of as if God had specially desired it; for I feel convinced that then it is the result of a violation, although often involuntary, of some of God's laws, in the same way as is all evil. I spoke of this last Sunday; but I would again repeat it, so that it may be impressed on your minds. I believe God's laws to be *perfect*; and therefore, if they are broken, the result must be bad; and in this way, if the laws of health be neglected, evil consequences must ensue."

"But, auntie," said May, "surely it would be unjust to punish people for actions that they did not know were wrong, or over which they had no control, as in the case of hereditary disease, for instance."

"It certainly often appears to be so. But, thanks to those supplementary laws that seem to give to us what the compensating balance does to the watch, the moral nature of each individual need suffer no hurt

from the action of those other laws that govern the universe."

"What do you mean, auntie?" asked Cara.

"I mean that it may be necessary for the proper regulation of the universe that laws that appear hard and cruel should exist; but in order that our lives may not be blighted by their operation, compensating ones are also created, so that the bitterness of the evil may be turned aside, and good be born out of our troubles. If we have faith in God, we shall not sorrow as those without hope, but shall feel that, as a loving Father ordereth all things, every thing may be made to serve a good and ennobling purpose. Therefore, although we must all drink from the cup of bitterness, we shall see hope at the bottom, and do our utmost to cultivate those blessings that remain to us."

"Well! auntie," said Cara, "that seems possible with most forms of evil; but death is so overpowering and final that I do not think that I could find comfort under such an affliction."

"Then you have not yet learnt to love your Heavenly Father aright. Surely we may trust our loved ones to His care. He is far wiser than we are, and so we may rest assured that they are safe with Him—while to us is given the blessed hope of a future reunion. In the meantime we must do our work on earth bravely and earnestly, and thus actively prove ourselves worthy children of the Most High. Miss Bremer, in one of her books, has this beautiful paragraph on Life and Death:—

"Death must not be regarded as a liberation from a prison; it is only a step out of the valley to the top

of the mountain, where we enjoy a more extended prospect, and where we breathe lightly—out of the valley into which, indeed, the light and the warmth of the sun penetrate, and where also the love of God embraces us. Learn properly to understand and love life, if thou wilt rightly understand and love eternity. A true Christian must already be happy here on earth; that is the problem of life which every one of us must, with all our power, endeavour to solve—that difficult problem whose solution so few have achieved, and which has cost the multitude so much conflict; yet the more and the greater are the difficulties, the more honourable it is to carry off the victory. Man may be disappointed in his greatest hopes in life without, on that account, becoming unhappy.’”

“If people thoroughly realized this, how much more happiness would exist!” said Aunt Pollie. “There is a great deal of truth in the saying, ‘The mind is its own bliss or woe.’ If when sorrow comes we determine to make the best of life by helping others, and in any other way that we can, we shall not only gain happiness, but shall fill a useful and worthy place in the world. What a different sentiment is that expressed by Miss Bremer, from some of the sermons and gloomy teachings of those who think this world is a dreary, wicked place, and that our whole thoughts should be spent in longing to exchange it for a better.”

“Yes,” added Aunt Amy, “as if this were not God’s world as well as any other. It seems to me a poor way of praising Him, to sit down and repine at our present condition, instead of buckling to and doing the work He has given us well and heartily, ‘not’ as

George Eliot says, 'waiting for speculative chances, but preparing for them.'"

"Auntie," asked Cara, "will you tell us some of the good that death develops? I can only think of two qualities—resignation and sympathy."

"Ah! Cara, those two alone are wonderful in their power; and only those who have really felt their influence can tell how much they can do in soothing and softening the sting of death. How many people who have appeared hard and cold, throw off this outer covering at such a time and reveal tender and sympathetic hearts! How many peevish words and cross looks are forgotten, and the friends that have been estranged become again closely united! The village schoolmaster's reply to Little Nell, in the 'Old Curiosity Shop' is very beautiful. She had been lamenting that those who die are forgotten so soon, and had pointed to the neglected graves in proof of this.

"'And do you think,' said he, 'that an unvisited grave, a withered tree, a faded flower or two, are tokens of forgetfulness or cold neglect? Do you think there are no deeds, far away from here, in which these dead may be best remembered? Nell! Nell! there may be people busy in the world at this instant, in whose good actions and good thoughts these very graves—neglected as they look to us, are the chief instruments. . . . There is nothing, no, nothing innocent and good, that dies and is forgotten. Let us hold to that faith or none. An infant, a prattling child dying in its cradle, will live again in the better thoughts of those who loved it, and will play its part, through them, in the redeeming actions of the world. . . . Forgotten! oh, if the good

deeds of human creatures could be traced to their source, how beautiful would even death appear! for how much charity, mercy, and purified affection would be seen to have their growth in dusty graves!"

"Have you read a book called 'The Gates Ajar,' auntie?" asked Mary.

"Yes, dear; but although its teaching is a great relief from the gloomy sentiments of many religious people, I cannot agree with it."

"Will you tell us why, please?" asked Mary, looking rather surprised.

"You are astonished, I see," returned Aunt Amy; "but though I admire the book for its earnestness and brightness, yet I think that our conception of a future life may be higher, and also that the reason for not fretting in despair may be better. You know the burden of the whole is this—that we should not fret, because we shall meet again hereafter, and in the flesh. Now one word first as to the latter idea. Chemistry teaches us that every atom of the human body will be changed and used again for other purposes—often for the construction of other human beings; and therefore a resurrection of the body would surely be an impossibility. But this need not distress us at all; for do we not lose constantly the form of those we love? A baby is born to us, and in its baby ways it wins our hearts. But time goes on, and in the merry schoolboy at our side the baby form is quite lost: and yet our hearts are satisfied; for we know the same spirit is there, and the change is simply a token of progress. Years roll away, and in the strong man we lose the laughing boy and helpless babe! But who will repine at this? Who will not truly re-

joyce at the glorious development, and thank God for the steady progress of those we love?"

"Besides," suggested Aunt Pollie, "surely the idea of a personal resurrection would often be an unhappy one. Take for example, the case of Roy and his sister in 'The Gates Ajar.' Roy was a boy when he died; but his sister was probably old and grey before death came to reunite them: and thus their relationship would be almost changed if the spirits of the loved ones be supposed ever to retain the form they last wore on earth."

"Indeed it would," said Aunt Amy. "It is not the form, but the evergrowing spirit that we cherish and wish to have with us again; and that, I think we are justified in hoping, will at some future time be granted."

"It seems a little strange," said May, "to hear you say that you so thoroughly believe in a future life and reunion without having any thing to prove it. Of course I don't mean that exactly, auntie; but you know other people point to the Bible and build their faith on its teaching, while you never do so."

"No further than this. The people who lived when the New Testament was written, when Zoroaster taught, and Mahomet preached; and people, too, who are found all over the globe, with but few exceptions—whether they possess the Bible or not, hold some belief concerning a future life; therefore, because it is so generally held, I think that this is evidence of its being true. But it is in the manifold works of God—so beautiful and full of wisdom—that I find the strongest proof that He will do what is best for us; and because

our future reunion is the very best that I can conceive, I feel justified in hoping for it."

"But," asked May, "as you do not know the whole truth, may not your ideas be mistaken?"

"Certainly," answered Aunt Amy. "And so, although the hope of a meeting hereafter with those we love is very dear to us, and brightens all our life, yet that hope must ever be subservient to the thought that it will only happen if it be right and best for us. Thus our prayer should always be, 'Thy will, O God, not mine, be done!' while the aim of our lives should be, so to search after the truest mode of living, that our will may grow in harmony with God's.

"You understand, then, that it is *not* the hope of reunion that should make us bear our part bravely when dear ones fall around us in the battle of life; our banner of comfort should be 'Faith, Trust, and Reliance in God,' because He has shown Himself to be so good and so loving, besides being so powerful. At the same time the hope of being again welcomed by those we have loved must cast a ray of light on our path through life, and help us to bear nobly our trials and sorrows, thus preparing for the time when we too shall pass out of this earthly valley into the purer air of the mountains of Heaven. But through all, may we bear in mind Longfellow's beautiful lines:—

'Angels of Life and Death alike are His,
Without His leave they cross no threshold o'er;
Who then would wish or dare, believing this,
Against His messengers to shut the door?'

THIRTEENTH SUNDAY.

ON FAITH, HOPE, AND LOVE.

"We have now," said Aunt Amy, on the following Sunday, "met together for twelve afternoons, and have done our best to find some light to guide you in your quest after truth. And we feel that the time has come for you to think out for yourselves the suggestions we have made; and as there is now sufficient matter to occupy your thoughts for some time, we propose after next Sunday to leave off these meetings, for a time at least."

"Do you really mean that our pleasant chats are to be broken up?" asked Cara. "I am so sorry; for I know we all enjoy them very much!"

"Yes, indeed we do!" added Mary. "You have told us so many things that we did not think of before."

"We are very glad to hear it, I am sure," returned her aunt; "but you must be careful not to make our religious thought a substitute for your own. Some words of the Archbishop of York, in his 'Laws of Thought,' seem to apply to this as well as to the philosophy of which he is speaking when he says:—'Philosophy does not exist until the mind of the student begins to work for itself with the principles it receives historically—to decompose and compose anew, to criticise the arguments employed, to essay, at least, to push the confines of truth further into the wilds of error and ignorance.... If the rules given in books are erroneous,

let them try to correct; if imperfect, to complete them; or if experience verifies their truth and utility, let them be regarded with a degree of trust greater than could have been awarded to them before, when they stood in books, the mere historical record of other men's philosophy.'"

"I have kept an account of our conversations, which I will give you as a sort of text-book for thought; and I trust that you will have sufficient interest in the subject to read further for yourselves.

"So much, then, for our theological study; but before separating I should like to speak more fully upon the three cardinal virtues, as they are called; and which are, I think, the guardian angels of our life. In proportion as we have for our companions true faith, hope, and love, will our path be easy and our burden light; and so to-day let us consider what they are, and why we should strive to possess them."

"I wonder," said Cara, "what Mr. Goodman would say if he heard you thus extolling faith and at the same time holding such heterodox opinions. He used to say that faith meant belief in the Bible as the Word of God, and an acceptance of the doctrines of the Church."

"If faith does mean that, I have no wish for her companionship," returned her aunt. "I think it has a much higher and truer meaning, although I know that his definition of it is held by many. Some years ago I was speaking to an orthodox friend about religion, and denying the existence of Hell, when she exclaimed 'But what is the use of faith, if it be not to accept things that pass our comprehension?' I tried to make

my companion understand that faith had still ample work to do in the world without compelling us to accept doctrines that are contrary to reason; but this she could not acknowledge. Another time when I pleaded a similar objection, I was told that faith was above reason, and therefore we were often bound to accept statements that were contrary to it. Now to me this appears a strange anomaly; faith and reason should surely not run counter to each other! Let us consider for a moment to what errors such a doctrine may give rise. Look at the poor Hindoo in his worship! How he mutilates his body to propitiate the gods! and how, on the great day of Juggernaut, he throws his children or even himself under the murderous car! Why is this? Is it not because he has faith that by such actions he will gain the favour of the gods? And how can the Christian dare to say that God is too just and good to desire such unnatural sacrifices, while at the same time he avows that in his religion also faith teaches things that are opposed to reason. May not the Hindoo fairly reply, 'We, like you, believe faith to be supreme; and therefore we observe ceremonies ordained by our church that, in the eyes of reason, are simply barbarous'? and may he not justly add, 'if mutilation and death on earth be repulsive, how much more so are the horrors of an eternal hell!''

"The fact is," said Aunt Pollie, "that it is not fair to judge our own creed by one standard, while we use a totally different one for that of others. If we apply our reason to discriminate the good from the bad in other religions, we ought, to be consistent, freely to allow its application to our own.

"Therefore," continued Aunt Amy, "we must find another definition of faith, if we are to admit her into our hearts. Webster gives an explanation that I like much. 'Firm and earnest belief, on probable evidence of any kind, especially in regard to important moral truth.' You see that here faith is made the result of *reasonable* evidence. This brings us to its real action, I think. If we find that the works of God supply reasonable evidence of His goodness and power, we must, as a natural consequence, feel secure that in all His dealings with man He is actuated by good and just motives, and so we shall trust to Him implicitly. Faith will teach us that good must prevail because God is good, and that evil must eventually be conquered, from its antagonism with the Divine nature."

"I think I understand what you mean," said Mary. "If we have faith that good will prevail, it will give us courage to do our work better. Mrs. Gaskell must have felt this when she wrote 'We know that no holy or self-denying effort can fall to the ground vain and useless; but the sweep of eternity is large, and God alone knows when the effect is to be produced.'"

"I am very glad you have remembered those lines," said Aunt Amy; "for they just express my meaning. And if we want an illustration of what faith will do, let us look at the lives of the world's heroes. Most of all do we see this in the life of Christ. He taught what he believed to be true, boldly and fearlessly, secure in the faith that, if it were of God, it would endure in spite of the scoffs of men, and live, even though he might die before its effect was achieved. Then, too, how well in the Garden of Gethsemane do we behold his faith in

God! His hour of trial was drawing near; he felt that the power of his enemies would overwhelm him ere long; and it was hard indeed to be forced thus to quit his work, his friends, his life. And so, no wonder that his whole being was agonized by the thought, and he cried 'Father, if Thou wilt, let this cup pass from me!' But in the midst of all this tribulation, his fervent trust and faith in God did not leave him, and full of resignation he added the words 'Nevertheless not my will, but Thine, be done.' Was there ever uttered a more beautiful prayer than this? How different from those constantly offered up around us, that to me seem but an assumption that we know better what is good for us than does our Heavenly Father. How much nobler, how much more full of faith, simply to pray,

'Thy will, O God, Thy will be done,
And may that will be mine!'

"And now, let us pass on to a consideration of hope, that bright-winged companion of faith, who gives a radiant colouring to even the saddest events that overtake us in life's journey."

"Do you know, auntie," said Cara, "it has often seemed strange to me that while people preach so much about faith and love, they rarely, if ever, take hope as a subject for the pulpit. And indeed, so far from making it a part of their religion, they often seem to exclude it altogether; for we find that many pious people are very sad and gloomy."

"I am afraid there is much truth in what you say, Cara," replied Aunt Amy. "Many seem to think that earth and all connected with it is too vile for hope to have any place here; and they reserve it all for the next

world—thus neglecting their nearer duty of making the most of their present blessings, while thinking too exclusively of the future.”

“What a mistake!” exclaimed Aunt Pollie. “Hope should be made part of our religion, and a prominent part too. Do you not remember the story of Pandora’s box, how it contained all sorts of evil, yet, having hope at the bottom, all was enabled to work well. And this old legend contains much truth. Look at two men—one hopeful, seeing the bright side of every thing, and thus having spirit to combat all life’s battles, the other, perhaps, with a far greater abundance of this world’s good things, but lacking hope. To such a one every thing appears gloomy, evils are magnified or imagined, and, instead of extracting honeyed sweetness from every flower of life, the bitterness alone is taken. With hope, almost any condition of life is bearable; without it, every thing is wretched.”

“If this be true,” said Aunt Amy, “should we not dearly cherish this messenger from God? in whose mirror there exists no cloud without its silver lining. Perhaps in no case is her presence of more practical importance than in a sick room. If a loved one be seriously ill, how often will you hear those around refusing absolutely to listen to the strains of hope! They bear with you patiently while you speak of it; but afterwards with a deep sigh they tell you, ‘It is all very well to speak so; hope may whisper its delusive strains in your ears; but for my part I can’t believe it,’—and this almost as if you had been content simply to shut your eyes to the true state of the case. But I earnestly entreat you, let not such words as these deter

you from entertaining hope. No one can dislike more than I do the cowardly and wilful blindness that induces people to refuse to believe unpalatable truths ; but that is as different from hope as paste from diamonds. No ! I would have every difficulty or trial bravely met and grappled with ; but I would remember too (and this will enable us to battle with more energy) that there is *no single sorrow* from which hope need be absent. Even in the face of death she will illuminate the cloud, and bid us look forward to the time when God will, if it be right, once more reunite us. In nursing the sick, or when we are ourselves prostrated by illness, if hope bear us company all will be well ; she will nerve our arm, strengthen our heart, and revive our drooping spirits. It is not, then, simply in the abstract that we would have you admire this bright-robed angel, but we want you to cultivate and love her, so that she will be ever at your side."

"But, auntie," said Cara, "some people are not hopeful by nature ; what are they to do ?"

"They must do with hope what they do with other qualities that they wish to possess. As yet her useful mission is not sufficiently recognized among us ; but when her value is realized and the help and strength she gives fully understood, then will all true souls seek diligently after her until she is found. Therefore, to those in whose hearts she already dwells I would say, 'Thank God for such a precious gift ; with such a guardian no one need be unhappy long ; keep her pure and spotless, and she will ever yield thee true comfort.' But those who have not as yet heard her joyous message I would exhort to seek her out and woo her

earnestly; for she will be found well worthy of the trouble."

"You speak as though you held hope in high estimation indeed, auntie," said Mary. Which do you think of the most value to us, faith or hope?"

"I can scarcely separate one from the other, they are so closely connected. I often think of faith as the sun, and hope as the moon of our life. Faith has a wider domain and shines supreme, obeying only the Spirit of Love that governeth all things. But true hope receives its light from the sun of faith, and spreading its gentle rays over the earth, bids us all remember that faith is still doing its work, although we may only see its reflection in the beautiful moon of hope."

"I like that comparison," said May. "And then I suppose that you would say that love is the power that controls the whole."

"Just so; and 'now abideth faith, hope, and love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.' Love has more power than any thing else in this beautiful world of ours; and if any proof be needed of our God being a Loving Presence among us, it is surely found in the fact that He has made love the ruling power in our moral nature. We are told to strive after that 'perfect love that casteth out fear;' in other words, we should do the right, not from fear of punishment, but because we love God and wish to please Him by living as much as possible in harmony with His laws."

"Love has so great a place in the world that mankind has been obliged to recognize its power; and this is so generally accepted that there is no need to vindi-

cate its claims now," remarked Aunt Pollie. "But there is one lesson that ought to have a place here, as it refers to our search after truth. It often seems difficult to understand that a line of conduct or a set of opinions that appear to us to be quite wrong, should be adopted by others, for whom, perhaps, in every thing else we have a respect and admiration. In these cases the influence of a loving charity is sadly wanted. It will make us hesitate before applying to them hard and unkind epithets simply because they act from other motives and pursue different means to secure their object. If we will but acknowledge the presumption of thus judging other people by our own feeble light, this world will become ever so much purer and better."

"I believe the root of much of this uncharitableness lies in a want of faith in the stability of truth," Aunt Amy continued. "How, otherwise, are we to account for the terror, I may almost say, with which people view the investigations of others who arrive at a different conclusion from their own? If we really wish for the truth, we may rest satisfied that it will endure in spite of all else; and the more earnest true-hearted men think about such matters, the better it will be for all humanity, although they may sometimes be misled by special circumstances, or mistaken, according to our ideas, in some of their conclusions. We may rest assured that truth will not suffer in the hands of any honest investigator; and therefore we should be careful never to disparage any who join in the quest. And now I shall say no more about the mission of love; for I am sure you all know how wide-spread is its influence,

although we constantly need reminding of our duty in cultivating it."

"Next Sunday will be our last, I suppose," said Mary regretfully, "what is our subject to be?"

"I should like," answered Aunt Amy, "to finish our conversations by an inquiry into the use of religion, and also by summing up the practical lessons that they have suggested.

"A sort of repetition," said Cara. "I think that will make a very good conclusion; and it will be sure to be interesting."

FOURTEENTH SUNDAY.

USES OF RELIGION AND OF A STUDY OF THEOLOGY.

"To-day," began Aunt Amy, when the little group had gathered round for the last conversation, "we are to do our best to sum up the practical lessons we have learnt in these afternoons' chats. First, then, what advantages do we hope to gain by rejecting the belief in the infallibility of the Bible?"

"Surely this," answered Ernest; "we shall no longer be forced to accept any views of God that are contrary to our highest conception of Him. And, again, our religion will not be tied down to certain hard and fixed lines, but will progress in proportion as our knowledge increases and our minds enlarge."

"That is right," replied his aunt. "Thus simplified, it will become more comprehensive, and the teachings of Christ will be far more likely to gain an entrance into our hearts than when encumbered by so much rigid and elaborate dogma. And, now, what is the use of thus studying theology at all, instead of leaving it to those who are undoubtedly so much more learned and clever than we are?"

"Because, auntie," said Mary, "great and wise thinkers differ so much in their conclusions that we cannot agree with some without disagreeing with others. Besides, we must think out our opinions for ourselves before they are thoroughly our own and can be of service to us in our every-day life."

✓ "Yes, it is only in this way that religion proves its true value. Again, if we have gone over the ground ourselves, we shall better understand the difficulty of choosing wisely ; and this will make us more tolerant of others. We shall feel that Christ's command, 'Love to God and man,' contains the essentials of all true religion ; and so to all who make this the watchword of their lives—be they Christian, Mussulman, or Buddhist—we shall be ready to offer the right hand of fellowship. Let me read to you an extract from Dean Stanley's discourse on the late Dr. Arnold, that bears on this subject.

" 'What was it that Arnold told us of religion ? It was that religion—the relation of the soul to God—depends on our moral and spiritual characters. He has made us understand that the only thing for which God supremely cares, the only thing which God supremely loves, is goodness—that the only thing which is supremely hateful to God is wickedness. All other things are useful, admirable, beautiful in their several ways. All forms, ordinances, means of instruction, means of amusement, have their place in our lives. But religion, the true religion of Jesus Christ, consists in that which makes us wiser and better, more truthful, more loving, more tender, more considerate, more pure. Therefore, in his view, there is no place or time from which true religion is shut out—there is no place or time where we cannot be serving God by serving our fellow-creatures.' "

"But, auntie," said May thoughtfully, "if we recognize as sons of God the earnest followers of every religion, surely it does not matter under what form we worship Him."

"I do not say that. The form we choose (to be of real use to us) must be the very highest that we can conceive. For example, the Hindoo, when he sacrifices his children, does only what he believes to be his duty; and so long as he holds this belief, he is only doing right in thus following it out. Still we cannot but feel that if he could be led to understand that such an idea of God is a mistaken one, his life would be all the purer and better for the abolition of such offerings. Dugald Stewart tells us that there are two kinds of right:—absolute right (which words explain themselves); and relative right—that is, when the person acting does the very best that appears to him possible. This latter rectitude the followers of any creed may possess, as long as, 'in whatever circumstances they are placed, they do that which they consider right at the time.'"

"But," said Cara, "in so acting they may make mistakes, and thus do a great deal of harm."

"Certainly; and so to prevent this as much as possible, we must use all our talents to their utmost in search of better and purer knowledge. We shall not be able to reach absolute truth, but we may all get much nearer to it than we are now; and in proportion as our steps advance to its attainment, will our lives become purer and better."

"Some people, though," said Cara, "think that they do possess the truth absolutely. In this book of Canon Liddon's, for instance, called 'Some Elements of Religion,' that I have just been reading, he says:—'If man's deepest needs are to be satisfied, he must believe that his creed is absolutely, and not relatively true.'"

"Yes," added May; "and he continues, 'Philosophy

bids believers in Christianity make the best of it, on the ground that if it be not absolutely true, it is a phase of truth, true to the believer, true provisionally, although liable to be superseded by a higher truth in days to come. But would any sensible man die for a "relatively true religion"? Again, he says, 'Any creed, whether true or false, must claim to be absolute, or make no claim at all.'

"That seems to me a very strange assertion," replied Aunt Amy, "especially as he gives in proof of this a reference to the Ptolemaic system (the theory of which was, that the sun and planets revolved around the earth), which, he tells us, while it lasted, 'was held as absolute truth; yet Copernicus proved it to be wrong.' As it is thus shown that doctrines are none the more true for being considered so, I think it is better to acknowledge at once our possibility of error, and only to give our opinions as provisionally true. We may be just as earnest; and, to my mind, religious life is far more healthy, and its action of more practical value, when we have continually to seek it out, than when we are content to fancy that the full tide of light is reached, and that there is no further work to be done in the way of seeking for more."

"Auntie," said May, "people say that our religion is so cold and hard, and that in times of trouble it can give no real comfort. Is it so?"

"People do assert this, I know," replied Aunt Amy; "and, no doubt, its simplicity would be a drawback to many who are used to the flowery traditions of the past; but to me its teaching is full of true and sterling comfort. I have often heard it said, 'How useless is a belief in a

God if you do not think that He will be moved by your prayers, or will ever turn from his purpose on your behalf!' But, surely, if we believe His purpose is the very best, we shall not wish Him to change His course simply because our feeble minds cannot follow all the workings of His wisdom and love. Will not the thought that He knoweth and will do what is best for us give the truest comfort for the fainting heart?"

"Well," said Cara, "the doctrine that teaches that just a few, who hold certain views concerning Christ, will be saved, while all the rest of mankind must perish, seems to me a most melancholy one; and I should almost feel inclined to say that I did not wish to enter heaven while so many so much more worthy than myself are forbidden admittance there."

"I like that feeling, Cara; you are echoing the words of Moses when he pleaded with God for the forgiveness of his people, and cried 'Forgive their sin! and if not, blot me, I pray Thee, blot me out of Thy book which Thou hast written.' His sympathizing spirit made him prefer suffering with his countrymen, to happiness in which all could not share.

"I never realized the exclusiveness of such a doctrine so fully as in a plan I once saw in a shop-window at Brighton. It was supposed to be a sort of analysis of the population of the earth, divided according to their religious belief. It consisted of several circles, one inside the other, the space in between each representing the different sections; but in the tiny space contained within the inmost circle, the elect were supposed to be gathered. I could not but think that within such narrow limits only a very few would be able to find

room, and that such a division betokened a mean sense indeed of the Creator's power or justice ; for it assumed that He had made vast multitudes of human beings who could by no possibility enter heaven. If such were true, how much more powerful an influence must evil be than good !

"And now let us pass on to our opinions concerning evil. While we continue to account for it as we have done, what duties ought we to perform ?"

"We ought to do our best to counteract its influence," answered May. "We shall feel that God has made us co-workers with Him ; and this will encourage us to do our part ; and the belief that sin and suffering originate in our misunderstanding the workings of God's laws, and not from any desire on His part to afflict us, should make us bring all our energies to the work. Do you know, auntie, I like that idea more than all the rest ; it gives so much hope to think that, some day, in the remote future, it may be—but still that, some day, evil and sin and suffering will cease to exist, because man has found out how rightly to use the divine gift of free will and thus live in harmony with the laws of God."

"I agree with you, dear May, that this is a hope-inspiring thought. I always admired those lines of Gerald Massey's :—

'This world is full of beauty
As that other world above :
And if we did our duty
It would be full of love.'

"I do hope," said May, "that I shall never come to doubt that truth !"

"Ah ! you must not call it truth in that absolute

way. Remember, these are only the thoughts that seem to our minds now the most in harmony with it; but as time goes on, we hope to reach a higher phase of truth. 'We know in part!' let us make that part as perfect as we can; but ever bear in mind that in our daily lives alone can we prove the real value of our thoughts and aspirations. And so the teachings of these Sunday afternoons will be useless unless they have given us an impetus to make our actions more worthy of our God.

"In conclusion, let us call to mind the teachings given us in the lives of true and holy men, and by the history of the ancients. If we reverence the spirit of trust and faith displayed by the old Jewish nation towards their Maker, let us take heed to cultivate it likewise; for surely we have far more cause than they to believe that all things are governed by a loving and wise Ruler, and that whatsoever He ordaineth has some good purpose in it, although as yet we may not have found it out.

"Again, if we admire the moral courage of Abraham when he dared to think out his religion for himself and obeyed his conscience rather than the outside voices of men, shall we not endeavour to emulate his example, and seek to follow out that truth which appears to us the holiest and the purest, even though the popular voices cry out against it?

"Then what a lesson for us in the life of Moses! What energy and perseverance does he teach by the way he battled with and overcame each difficulty or obstacle that beset his path! What hope and faith must have been his to have kept him from despair when his people broke from him and rebelled at every turn! and, above

all, what a pure-hearted and unselfish man he was, thus doing his duty and ascribing his successes to the glory of God, refusing to take any flattering unction to himself !

“ But if these men have taught us so many practical lessons for our daily guidance, what shall we say of him whom we admire and love and reverence as our pure-hearted and noble-minded leader ? ‘ If ye love me, keep my commandments,’ ‘ Love God and man.’ These are his wishes ; may we prove ourselves worthy to be called his disciples by striving heartily to act in accordance with them. Let us make him our model, live in his spirit, and, by doing even the meanest duties of our daily life thoroughly and to the glory of God, show that we appreciate Christ’s work and are at one with him.

“ Be what thou seemest, live thy creed,
Hold up to earth the torch divine ;
Be what thou prayest to be made,
Let the great Master’s steps be thine.

Fill up each hour with what will last ;
Buy up the moments as they go :
The life above, when this is past,
Is the ripe fruit of life below.”—*Rev. H. Bonar.*

FINIS.

